

Northern Ireland

Arlene Foster's Spad defends passing insider RHI information to huge poultry frm





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Arlene Foster's former special adviser has robustly defended passing potentially commercially valuable insider information to Northern Ireland's largest private sector employer.

Appearing before the RHI Inquiry yesterday for a fifth day, Andrew Crawford was presented with an email which he had sent to a long-standing friend, Brian Gibson, who is a senior manager in billion pound poultry processor Moy Park.

The email from the DUP minister's special adviser (Spad) was sent on 7 November 2014 – just a few months before the RHI scheme began to run out of control, in large part due to an influx of applications which Moy Park encouraged its suppliers to make so that they could upgrade the heating systems in their poultry sheds.

The email referred to a conversation between the two men and attached a briefing document on RHI which the Spad had asked a civil servant working on the scheme to prepare for him.

It was one of multiple high-level contacts between Moy Park and the department in relation to the RHI scheme.

'I can talk you through the detail'

Dr Crawford said in the email: "The non-domestic scheme is likely to change next summer. However, these changes are not likely to have a negative impact on Moy Park growers. If you want to give me a call I can talk you through the detail."

Dr Crawford told the inquiry that it was “regular” for a “one-page factsheet” – such as that sent to Moy Park – to be produced and that sometimes Mrs Foster would have handed such sheets to businesses.

He insisted that the detail in the document would have already been in the public domain, but it was put to him that some of what he was sending to Moy Park was not known to the public and could be commercially valuable.



Andrew Crawford giving evidence to the RHI Inquiry yesterday

Dr Crawford repeatedly said that his assurance to Moy Park that it was unlikely to face a

“negative impact” from looming changes related to existing RHI claimants – who under the rules of the scheme were always meant to have their subsidy levels locked in for 20 years – rather than future claimants.

Dr Keith MacLean, the technical assessor to the inquiry, put it to Dr Crawford that his email was open to an interpretation which goes “way beyond” that.

Dr Crawford repeatedly made clear that his actions had been consistent with a Stormont Executive policy of assisting Moy Park wherever possible.

When asked if he had “become casual in sending out material” to outsiders, Dr Crawford offered a firm defence of his actions as part of an Executive-wide strategy to work closely to help Moy Park.

Moy Park: ‘A company the Executive worked with’

He said: “No, I don’t believe there was anything wrong in sending this email because it was information that was in the public domain.

“To put it in context – Moy Park is the largest private sector invest in Northern Ireland. It is a foreign direct investment – it is owned by a South American company.

“The Executive at that time – and I think rightly so – put a lot of importance on the company. When I was with Arlene Foster, I went to see the CEO and CFO of Moy Park in Brazil.

“Subsequently the first and deputy first minister went to Brazil to meet the top management of Moy Park. We dealt with them on a large number of issues through a number of departments that I was in...waste disposal, there was issues with regard to access to finance for the company which was in DETI, there was ‘going for growth’ and the initiative that was there and helping the sector to grow and Invest NI were directly dealing with the company.

“So across various portfolios I would have had a large number of dealings with the company – there were issues with planning and planning approvals and all the rest of it. So this was a company that the Executive worked with and spent time with and encouraged to grow because our very clear view was that if they didn’t grow in Northern Ireland they would grow elsewhere.”

Inquiry chairman Sir Patrick Coghlin interjected to say: “All of that is no doubt true – that they are an important customer. That does not entitle them to inside information. It doesn’t entitle them to a prediction from you as an insider that changes are not likely to have a negative impact. How do you know if they are or they aren’t?”

Dr Crawford stressed that he only intended his comment to refer to Moy Park's suppliers already on the scheme.

But Sir Patrick said: "You don't say that" and Dr MacLean said that if that was what he meant "you wouldn't have had to say 'likely' because there was an absolute condition".

Preferential treatment for huge company

Dr Crawford said that Moy Park may not have realised that the tariffs were guaranteed for 20 years once a claimant was on the scheme.

Dr MacLean said that Dr Crawford was making statements which could impact on the investment plans of a major company and the farmers who supply it and highlighted that Moy Park was not the only poultry company in Northern Ireland.

He said: "What you are doing here is providing support and information to one part of the industry and not to all participants in the industry."

Dr Crawford said that he was responding to a specific query but Dr MacLean said that he was "doing so presumably to assist them...you are therefore putting them in a different position with regard to the department than you are to other players in the industry."

Dr Crawford said: "I don't agree with that. I believe that what I was doing was providing clarity to the company" and insisted again that there was nothing in the correspondence which was not in the public domain, something Dr MacLean said was not right.

DUP Spad Brimstone had boilers and wanted to talk to key official

The inquiry was read part of [an article in the Daily Mirror](#) in 2014 in which RHI claimants in GB spoke openly about how lucrative the scheme was, with one claimant saying "the bizarre thing is the more energy you use, the more money it makes you."

Sir Patrick said that article – which Dr Crawford said was not noticed by him – was "just another clear example of the disconnect which seems to have existed between the Executive in the form of the departments, and the ordinary people. We've heard all about cash for ash, burn to earn which was being shown day in, day out at various events; the Daily Mirror picks this up...the fact is the ordinary people knew so much more about what this scheme was producing in terms of lucrative income than apparently the department, the minister or anyone else knew."

Dr Crawford said that the issue had not been picked up by the media in Northern Ireland

and that if it had been reported by the BBC he may have been more likely to have seen it. But Sir Patrick said: “With respect, I suspect the minister read the odd newspaper and I suspect there were people in the media department who also might have read the odd newspaper and that makes it even more difficult to understand why this disconnect existed.”

The Daily Mirror article was printed on 10 November and – in what barrister Joseph Aiken noted may have been an entirely unrelated development – several days later another DUP Spad, Stephen Brimstone, contacted Dr Crawford seeking to speak to a key RHI official.



Stephen Brimstone giving evidence to an Assembly committee investigating his actions.

Eight days after the article Dr Crawford asked for the phone number of Stuart Wightman, one of the two officials within the department overseeing the RHI scheme, and three days later he sent Mr Wightman an email asking the civil servant to phone him.

Three days after that, Dr Crawford sent Mr Wightman’s contact details to Mr Brimstone. Mr Brimstone was then Spad to social development minister Nelson McCausland and was at that point under investigation by the Assembly’s social development committee which was investigating DUP whistleblower Jenny Palmer’s allegation that he had tried to pressure her into voting for the controversial firm Red Sky to receive Housing Executive contracts, telling her “The party comes first- you do what you are told”.

The committee described the evidence of Mr Brimstone – who would go on to be promoted by the DUP and work as Spad to Mrs Foster – as “deliberately evasive in his answers to the point of obstructing the committee in carrying out its statutory function”, a finding with which DUP members of the committee disagreed.

Dr Crawford told the inquiry he “can’t remember the finer details” of why Mr Brimstone –

who last year was revealed to have an RHI boiler of his own – was asking for the contact details of the responsible official.

He said that he “can make an assumption that Stephen wanted to talk about the RHI scheme” because when he was working in the First Minister’s office (although at that point he was not there) he was working on the green new deal policy.

Inquiry barrister Joseph Aiken interjected: “I think it might be more that he...wanted to talk to Mr Wightman about his boilers”.

Dr Crawford said: “I’m not aware of the discussion that took place...I can’t recall, no.”

He said that despite his close working relationship with Mr Brimstone he did not learn that his fellow Spad was an RHI claimant until November or December of 2016 – either just before the scandal erupted or once it became public.