



Northern Ireland
Assembly

Committee for the Environment

OFFICIAL REPORT (Hansard)

National Parks: UFU Briefing

4 October 2012

NORTHERN IRELAND ASSEMBLY

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Members present for all or part of the proceedings:

Ms Anna Lo (Chairperson)
Mr Simon Hamilton (Deputy Chairperson)
Mr Cathal Boylan
Mr Tom Elliott
Mrs Dolores Kelly
Mr Barry McElduff
Mr Francie Molloy
Lord Morrow
Mr Alastair Ross
Mr Peter Weir

Witnesses:

Mr James Murphy	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr Douglas Rowe	Ulster Farmers' Union
Mr Derek Thornton	Ulster Farmers' Union

The Chairperson: Our next briefing is from the Fermanagh branch of the Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU). We have with us James Murphy, Douglas Rowe and Derek Thornton. Gentlemen, you are very welcome. We are running a bit behind time, so I will give you five minutes to give us a quick briefing, after which members will have questions.

Mr James Murphy (Ulster Farmers' Union): Thank you, Chair. You are all very welcome to Fermanagh today. It is good to see you making an effort to come out of Belfast and meet us here in Fermanagh.

Mr Boylan: We are not all from Belfast. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Murphy: You have travelled from all over. I am a local dairy farmer, and I am also vice-chairman of the Ulster Farmers' Union Fermanagh county committee. I apologise for the absence of our chairman, Mr Andrew Wilson; he is with a group of farmers in France.

As representatives of Fermanagh farmers' union, we are grateful for the opportunity to represent the views of our 1,100 members in Fermanagh. The issue of national parks has been thoroughly discussed by our union membership over the past two years. This presentation and our question-and-answer session will hopefully give you an insight into our position. In Fermanagh, there are almost 3,000 farm businesses, which employ 5,100 people. Beef and sheep farms make up 2,500 of those businesses, with almost 300 dairy farms. Of the 3,000 farm businesses, 95% are classed as small or very small; they typically give employment to one or two people. That employment level makes

farming the largest private sector employer in Fermanagh. If we consider all the downstream businesses that depend on agriculture, the figure is much greater. Milk, beef processors, feed mills, equipment suppliers, marts, quarries, local shops and fuel companies all count us farmers as their key customers.

Any downturn in agriculture is magnified across many sectors in the county. We want to see a vibrant local economy based on agriculture, tourism and business. It is our concern that the national parks proposal would hinder each of those areas.

National parks could seriously affect farming practice and development. Planning applications, which the Committee has already mentioned, and restrictions on agricultural building will add costs and inhibit farm development and ongoing investment. Restrictions on building will make it difficult for us to meet other regulations such as the nitrate regulation or future regulation under the water framework directive. Additional planning restrictions on residential buildings will prevent older farmers from retiring off farm.

A national park authority may get involved in farming practice, dictating when hedges and rushes should be cut and how and when areas can be grazed. We should always bear in mind the limited profitability of many farms. We have suffered a very difficult year with extreme weather, falls in beef, lamb and milk prices and rises in feed costs. I want to emphasise to the Committee that many farms have no capacity to bear additional costs from increasing regulation. Those costs will lead to greater numbers exiting our industry and fewer new entrants.

Many farmers are in the countryside management scheme, which seeks to enhance and preserve the farmed environment. It is a voluntary scheme for 10 years, with a possible break after five years. Any national park proposal is indefinite, with no option for any farmer to opt out. The countryside management scheme is under-funded at the moment, and it accepts only low numbers of new entrants. The national park budget intended to conserve and protect those areas should be put into existing schemes that are accepted by farmers.

Modern farming has increasing levels of bureaucracy and red tape. At its introduction in 2005, the single farm payment was sold as freedom to farm, which seemed a reasonable proposal. Conditions on stock numbers at certain times of the year would be removed, and we would have more freedom in our activities. Our Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) would operate more efficiently and have an easier time administering the programme. Unfortunately, that has not turned out to be the case.

DARD now has to re-map every field in Northern Ireland to 99.5% accuracy; it also faces a disallowance from the EU of approximately £80 million for errors in the scheme. That situation has arisen despite the best efforts of DARD officials. The external EU regulators are calling the shots. We, the farmers, are living with increased numbers of inspections of our farmyards, of field boundaries and of every square inch of the land that we farm. In many cases, we are heavily penalised for small mistakes.

Our Environment Minister assured us at our recent Cookstown meeting that no additional bureaucracy was his goal. However, a national park designation will have to be managed to an external standard. Similar to the situation in field mapping and single farm payment, an external authority, far removed from the situation on the ground, will dictate the regulation and will place an increasing burden on us.

A central tenet of the national parks proposal is the tourism boost that it may provide. We, as farmers, back tourism; many farming families supplement their farming income with income from tourism. It concerns us that a national park proposal may actually be to the detriment of local tourism. We are proud of the promotion that our county receives and the welcome that we give to visitors. However, our local tourism office, which has served us well, will be swallowed up into the national parks body. Local initiatives will have to be proposed and approved by the national park authority. Again, additional planning and bureaucracy will stifle tourist developments.

Hopefully, your presence here today gives you a chance to listen to local needs and to quiz the tourism representatives on what additional help they need. Surely those needs can be met through existing structures at a lower cost to the Assembly. I am sure that the Committee was impressed by the tourism success that you witnessed recently in the Lake District. That success is partly down to a large population within a couple of hours' drive. In Ireland, however, we do not have a comparative population. Moreover, here in the west of the Province, we feel at the end of the queue for

infrastructure projects. Road upgrades and a bypass for Enniskillen are a must before greatly increased tourist numbers could be accommodated.

A further point that I mentioned about agriculture is that it is the number one employer in Fermanagh. I have also mentioned the structure, with small family farms being the mainstay. The land here is generally privately owned. On your recent research trip to the Lake District and Loch Lomond, you may have noted how walkers and ramblers make up a large portion of the tourists. The land at the Lake District and Loch Lomond is criss-crossed with public footpaths and bridleways, which create their own problems for farmers in those areas. Issues such as safety for the public from livestock, damage to crops and the safe operation of machinery frequently rear their head.

As a union, we are doing our best to improve the safety record on local farms. It is a difficult job. Additional tourists near livestock and machinery could add to the current lamentable safety record. The national parks in the UK have some productive farmland but quickly rise to sparsely populated common land. That differs from the situation in Fermanagh, which has much more private land and very few common grazing areas, and there are no historical rights of way through that privately owned land. A national park here would not conform to tourist expectations of an open countryside.

Publicly owned land in Fermanagh has restricted access. There are many opportunities in the sector to develop footpaths, mountain bike trails and public access. Indeed, we welcome the Agriculture Minister's upcoming initiative on national trails day, which will open and promote forest parks and National Trust properties to the public. There is more to do in that area before giving local farmers the difficulties that are faced by our UK counterparts.

I have touched on a few of the issues about the national park that are constantly being raised by local members. As representatives of the Ulster Farmers' Union, we are happy to make those points on behalf of our members. Has the Committee extended the invitation to other employers in the county, such as local chambers of commerce? We know, from speaking to them, that many local businesses have strong concerns about a national park. I reaffirm the Ulster Farmers' Union commitment to developing local employment, vibrant local communities and a suitable infrastructure. We farmers are best placed to enhance and protect the countryside, and we see nothing in the enabling legislation proposals for national parks to forward those aims.

That is my presentation. In the interests of time, we can take questions now.

The Chairperson: I am afraid that we are quite tight on time. Thank you very much, James, for your presentation. What you said echoes many of the concerns that we have heard over the past year or two in Balmoral and different places. They were mostly farmers' concerns about more bureaucracy and more restrictions that they think may come with a public authority.

As you have been well briefed, we went to two places. Last week, we talked to four farmers. Some said that there were not that many extra restrictions on planning or bureaucracy. They said that the farms would not have been viable had it not been for the injection of tourism into the area. How do you feel about that? I know that change may be very difficult.

Mr Murphy: I became more concerned after the meeting in Cookstown. By going for the enabling legislation first, we are just opening the door. One of the Environment Minister's comments at that meeting was, "We will build it, and you can trust us; it will work out fine." I wanted to highlight in my presentation a couple of things that really went wrong for us in the past few years: field mapping and single farm payments. At the end of the day, we opened the door; we said at the time that it sounded good, but we ran into difficulties down the line. Due to the way in which the process is going, there is nothing on the table for us to say how it will affect us. At the minute, we are saying —

The Chairperson: The single farm payment is an EU directive.

Mr Murphy: That is right. Another external body managing national parks —

The Chairperson: A national authority would be a local authority.

Mr Murphy: Yes, but farmer representation on it might be small. It might be a difficulty.

Mr Douglas Rowe (Ulster Farmers' Union): Madam Chairman, on the average national park authority there is a team of about 22 members, of whom two are farmers. Your percentage voice is

very low. You talked about the people whom you met. In a former life, I had many dealings with people in parts of England. In 2001, one of the guys whom I dealt with was the then chairman of the less-favoured areas committee of the National Farmers' Union. Mr Allen farmed in the Lake District in Cumbria. Every year, 100,000 people walk across his yard — not his farm, his yard. He could not take one penny off them. Would you like that at your home or in any part of your constituency? I believe that your constituency is East Belfast.

The Chairperson: South Belfast.

Mr Rowe: Sorry, South Belfast. Yes, I know the area. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: What does that mean?

Mr Rowe: I was educated in it. If you were to move that into South Belfast, onto the streets of the Malone Road or the Lisburn Road, what would the reaction be? We do not want that sort of thing.

I am pleased to be back before the Committee; I was before it some years ago. At the time, I found its deliberations accurate and helpful. However, I found that when the Committee left down the item, which, at that stage, was the farm nutrient management scheme, the civil servants who carried it through — with all due respect to the two people who have just left us — went in an entirely different direction from the way that the Committee had instructed them. The enabling legislation must be killed before it gets to the statute book because all you are doing as politicians is enabling others to control by the fact that you have given them that right. That is the major problem that we see in this.

The Chairperson: With enabling legislation, there needs to be a great deal of consultation.

Mr Rowe: Yes, unless the legislation is never there. The legislation needs to be killed.

The Chairperson: A number of other MLAs have indicated that they want to ask questions, so I will not hog the issue.

Mr Weir: Thank you, gentlemen, for your cogent presentation. Perhaps a garden on the Malone Road would be big enough for 100,000 people to go through. My garden would not be big enough to accommodate them even if they went through it in single file throughout the year. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson mentioned consultation. I appreciate the point that is being made that if there is no enabling legislation, there is no need for consultation. However, obviously, we are at a stage in the potential run-up to that legislation. The wider issue has been raised of whether national parks should be created in Northern Ireland. As you are, obviously, acutely aware, there is the specific issue of Fermanagh's having been identified by the Minister as one of three potential areas where a national park could be situated. There was a meeting in Cookstown. Has there been any direct consultation or negotiation on that issue between the Department and you, as Fermanagh farming representatives, as opposed to with the wider UFU? I suspect that when the Minister met UFU representatives, there was not a great meeting of minds. Afterwards, the Minister tried to offer some public assurance, which was that he felt that whatever scheme there was in Northern Ireland, it would be flexible and adaptable enough to meet local needs. With regard to any feedback that you have received from the Department, has there been any concrete suggestions as to what changes it could make to the scheme to make it doable in Northern Ireland — and, more specifically, in Fermanagh — or has there just been a little bit of rhetoric at this stage?

Mr Murphy: Certainly, at a local farmers' union level, we have had no discussions with the Department at all. We have members who go to our executive committee who would be more familiar with the union position and exactly what negotiation is going on. We are very concerned. For me, the fact that it is indefinite is a concern. We can set it up today and all be reasonable and agree. However, in 50 years from now — I think that the Lake District has been a national park for more than 50 years — people will have moved on and things will have changed. If you create a bureaucracy or a management authority — or whatever it is — those responsible will require payment, will have a job and will have a reason to keep it going. Some of the documents that I have seen about the Lake District National Park show that those responsible are moving it more into environmental and farming practice so that they can keep their roles alive.

Mr Weir: I appreciate that Douglas is also looking in, but I want to follow up on that. The discussions by the Department on the wider context of where the national parks should be appear to be centred on the Mourne. Obviously, we cannot speak for the other two areas, but the Mourne has been on the table for a bit longer. There does not appear to have been any drilling down by the Department into the specific needs of Fermanagh —

Mr Murphy: I think that I am right in saying —

Mr Rowe: I have not heard one word or seen one scrap of paper, and I have been involved in this discussion for a long time.

The Chairperson: Have you had discussions in the community, but not with the Department?

Mr Rowe: The Department has not had any discussions, and I can tell you that the discussion in the community is that we do not want a national park. We have enough bureaucracy and enough problems; we do not want another tier of bureaucracy. We elected a parliament to take our views on board and legislate for the people.

Mr Weir: Douglas, on the other side of the question, have you had any indication from the Department of any way it would be willing to meet the concerns you raised on adapting a scheme for a national park? Or, again, has there been silence on that?

Mr Rowe: It has not even spoken to us. I think that I am right that the last Department man who spoke to us was James Kerr, and that was 21 years ago. In that time, there has not been a word or a letter at a local level. The last time it was raised 21 years ago, the Department took our objections on board and left after one meeting when it realised it was a non-runner in Fermanagh. It is still a non-runner.

The Chairperson: Peter raised a very good point that we picked up in Scotland. That was how much engagement the national park authorities and local authorities have had with local people. In the Lake District, there is a partnership called the Lake District National Park Partnership —

Mr Molloy: A quango is what I call it. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: This was a particular one from that — *[Interruption.]* It is engaging —

Mr Weir: Chair, I hope you are not looking for positions for the Alliance Party. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: The partnership engages with businesses and the farming community. There is so much more engagement there, and that is what we are lacking.

Mr Rowe: I do not want to hog the answers, but my experience of anything to do with consultation in Northern Ireland, particularly with the Department of the Environment, is that it is entirely a one-way street. As far as I am concerned, we do not want to go in that direction. I can give you a very good concrete example of something that the Committee and I were involved in in the past, but time may not allow me to do so. It is nothing but hassle. Francie said that he saw an NIE van when he was coming down the road. We see far too many of them

Mr Derek Thornton (Ulster Farmers' Union): Every day.

Mr Rowe: Yes; every day. I can give you a personal example —

The Chairperson: I am afraid that I will have to stop you there.

Mr Molloy: Thank you very much for the presentations. I think that the Chair may have been at a different meeting about national parks from the rest of us. My view is that a quango is running the show over there. One of the things that is very clear is that Fermanagh District Council could do a better job of managing the tourists. The tourists are already in Fermanagh; all a national park would do is create a management structure to control them.

As Tom said earlier, one farmer gave the example of it taking 24 years for a planning application to be approved, and it ended up costing him £40,000 more because of the style and the stone and all the rest of it. Concerns were raised across the board. The first point is that we cannot match what is the design of a national park; you would have to have the whole North to even come close to that. The Minister is proposing near enough that, because the original vision is — well, even Northern Ireland.

Mr Hamilton: Some of Donegal already is. *[Laughter.]*

The Chairperson: Right. Come on, members.

Mr Molloy: The Minister's proposal for four national parks, which was one of the suggestions, would be the entire North. There would be a wee cross in the middle that would not be covered, and Belfast would be outside of it.

Mr Elliott: Ormeau Park. *[Laughter.]*

Mr Molloy: My concern about the whole issue around national parks is that the local structures have been overtaken. The management scheme has been put in place; you basically have a chief executive running the entire operation. There is no consultation; it is about those who agree, not about those who disagree. The danger is that if you set up the same sort of quango here, you would have Fermanagh council being overruled. The authority of Fermanagh council and any other government body would be overruled. Another tier of bureaucracy would be put into it.

The issue that you mentioned about the amount of people walking across fields is something that we need to think about in the longer term here as well. The access that is guaranteed in England, Scotland and Wales means that basically anybody can go on to your field anywhere. One person told us that some campers came on with a lawnmower, mowed a patch of grass in the man's field and set up camp. There was nothing that the person could do about that. Those sorts of issues are very real because of the amount of people who could criss-cross land. We would have no control or management of it. Where structures were put in place, the maintenance of those was left to the farmer. There are big issues that we need to look at. The big problem is that the tourists were already there. What was really put in place in the Lake District and Loch Lomond was management structures to deal with it. Some of those people were members of a local authority and seemed to be quite happy at their authority being usurped by a quango that actually had been set up around the thing. Your concerns are similar to what some of us saw in that situation, and we are concerned about the future structure of it. They said that there is a 96% success rate in planning approvals, but they did not say how many had been ruled out before they ever got to the planning stage. How many people refused even to put in a planning application because they knew that there was no point?

Another very important thing was that the people who were in that area were the only people who were really consulted. The people who wanted to live in the area had not been consulted or could not get back into the area. If you owned a property, you had to sell it back to the structure within it, so it seemed very much like an entire management. It reminded me of that film about the new town that was set up, and everybody was under the control of it. It is very much in that particular line, so I think your concerns are very real. We need to kill it off at the very early stage rather than allowing the legislation to be there for somebody to abuse in the future.

The Chairperson: Francie, if I could just jump in, I think that that was clarified: they can sell to anybody outside, but if it is social housing, it has to be local people who get to become residents of that social housing.

Mr Molloy: No, I think the second clarification that we sought was that it had to be sold, but it had to be managed within the structure.

The Chairperson: But then they are allowed to sell to anybody.

Mr Elliott: This is all going one way. I declare an interest: I am a member of the Ulster Farmers' Union. I was quite taken aback —

Mr Rowe: He has not been seen at many meetings. *[Laughter.]* We are glad to know that he is a member.

Mr Elliott: In that respect, I may not be a member any longer, so you can disregard that. I will certainly cancel my standing order; I know when I am not appreciated.

I was taken aback by the comments of the chairman of one of the national parks, whom we met last week, when he said that the farming community was not part of the community there. He was almost welcoming them in from the cold. I took great offence to that. Perhaps it is different over there to how it is here, but I assume that the group here would not accept that assessment in Fermanagh or, indeed, any area of Northern Ireland. I would like to hear their views on that.

Mr Murphy: Certainly, I feel that the community here is very much agriculture-based. Employment in Fermanagh, in construction and various other things, has been going very well. When I chat to people I do business with, they say that the farmer is the only man who is still spending money. He is the only man who is, perhaps, not keeping it all, but turning it over. Therefore, the community here is still very much agriculture-based. We try to make the point that any downturn in our agriculture sector affects everybody.

Mr Thornton: Surely, we are all private landlords. Basically, in England, land is all publicly owned and the farmers are only tenants. I get the 'Farmers Guardian' paper. You see it, although not if you were renting out land in a national park area. As Francie said, surely, if you get into a national park and you had something to sell, it would be devalued by half when you go to sell it. Publicly owned land is completely different from privately owned land.

Mr Elliott: My point was that the chairman had indicated that the farming community had no community interest in the rest of what was happening in the community; they were almost an organisation or a group alone that did not participate in the rest of the community's activities. I do not think that that would be relevant here.

The Chairperson: No. The big tourism businesses, with boating, shops and all of that, but, yes.

Mr Rowe: To follow on from Tom's point, farmers and the farming community are involved in all social activities in Fermanagh. If you go to local dance classes or anything at all, it is the farmers, because we make up the biggest number of the population. We run those activities. Particularly in church and local life, the farming community runs things — the local football club, and those sorts of things. The farmers run them. We are not an exclusive club.

The Chairperson: It is good to hear that it is alive and well. I will bring Cathal in. We are running short on time. Quickly, Cathal.

Mr Boylan: Thanks, Chair. I get the message.

Thanks very much for your presentation. I was at the same meeting as Francie, by the way. Tom was there as well. I do not know where the Chair was. Maybe she was talking about South Belfast.

Certainly, having visited the two national parks, I have to say that one element of it is that a lot of that ground is publicly owned, which is totally different from yours. Surprisingly, in regard to conservation or preservation of the ground, what they set out to do 60 years ago was to designate this place. They have started to manage it properly only in the past 10 years. So, for 50 years, there was nothing happening. It is about the management of people. It is not about the land or anything else.

These are really only comments, Chair, as opposed to questions. There is no mention of sustainable rural communities. You are right about representation. Some of the responses that we got from farmers — they came to give us evidence. However, they were sitting among a team of people and were nearly afraid to say exactly what was going on, to be honest with you. Francie talked about planning applications. These were all business-orientated. I have a few questions for whoever is coming to discuss the tourism product, because I have different views on it. From an agricultural and farming point of view, practices over there have been decimated, to be honest with you. Like I said, it is about managing people.

I just want to ask one question. I have listened to your comments. Earlier, you talked about bureaucracy and red tape. Surely to God there are better farming practices now, you are adhering to them and there is a better programme to be rolled out through working with local councils and all the directives that you have, as opposed to setting up a new body just to manage the land. What are your views on that?

Mr Murphy: Your question is really about the practices that we already have in place. Certainly, there is a countryside management scheme. It gets involved in what you can do, when you can cut, and the actual enhancement and management of areas of ground. It is successful, but it is not for every farmer. If you manage 70% or 80% of the area to a really high standard, that is a really good start. Our issue is that the national park is a new authority with no opt-out for anyone, and running into trouble somewhere down the line.

Mr Boylan: I'm sorry, there was a wee bit of noise and I did not pick it up. In your presentation, you talked about a voluntary scheme. Can you expand on that?

Mr Murphy: The countryside management scheme is voluntary but again, just to be clear, the farmers get paid for taking part in it. There are enhancement works, which you are funded to do. If you take the real goal of a national park — enhancement and preservation of the actual landscape — countryside management is a good opportunity for it, and it already exists.

Mr Boylan: Finally, finally, Chair, I will just say this. Maybe they were not the best examples, but we went to two examples in England and Scotland. The thing is that they were about tourism, not about agriculture or farming practice. I am concerned, and we have talked about it. A lot of the land over here is in small holdings. That is the big difference between here and what we saw. I am not saying that we should have gone to 10 of them, or to Yellowstone National Park to see a proper national park. I do not think that Nolan would let us do that, to be honest. *[Laughter.]* The thing is that if we are serious about a national park, we must ask, as my colleague asked: what is a national park? I do not think that we have it here. I certainly have concerns for your community and from your side of things. If we brought this legislation in, it would not sit on the shelf; it would be enacted. Let us make no bones about it.

Mr Thornton: That is why we do not want it brought in.

Lord Morrow: I, too, thank these gentlemen for their presentation. You are probably speaking to the converted when you speak to me. I am not of the land; nevertheless, I have worked with a farming community for some 30 years. James, you said there, and Derek, I think you made the inference that — I was not at the meeting that these folk all had the privilege of attending last week in the Lake District. I had other things to do, but that is by the way.

You are saying that there is a considerable difference between what happens in England and what happens here, in that most of the farms here are in family ownership and it is not that way in England. James, you said that many of the farms are in the countryside management scheme — what percentage of farms do you reckon? I think the term you used was "many"; you were not specific on that.

Mr Murphy: Well, I suppose that is a changing target. Certainly, when the countryside management scheme was launched, the then Minister of Agriculture, Michelle Gildernew, came down to Enniskillen College. She said that it was a Fermanagh scheme. We have more of what I would classify as marginal ground, which is better for habitat, wildlife and hedgerows and stuff. I estimate that 40% of Fermanagh is in it. I could not say for definite.

Lord Morrow: Douglas, you said that it is 21 years since you last had any consultation on an issue like this.

Mr Rowe: That is right. Twenty-one years ago, this proposal was on the table. Then, of course, it was a direct rule Minister, and it came via civil servants. It was headed up by a man called James Kerr. Basil, who is sitting at the back, was chairman at the time. We made representation at that stage and had the Bill killed. That is what we intend to do today. You people are now elected by us, and it is important that you listen to the community. Remember, under proportional representation, the third and fourth preferences on the list, as well as first and second preferences, are very important when it comes to winning seats. We expect the members of the Committee and the Assembly to kill the legislation before the legislation kills us. That is what it will do: it will kill farming.

We are here to produce food to the best and highest quality that we can. It is a major world problem at the moment. We are also here to look after the environment, and we have looked after it for generations. Fermanagh would not be the county it is without the dedication of men who are sitting

here today, and the dedication of our sons who will come after us. Some of us are too busy to be in a place like this today. We are thankful that James is a young man who is a very progressive farmer. All of us here today have family coming into farming, and we want to keep the family farm going in Fermanagh and not have it subsumed into another useless quango.

Lord Morrow: I do not disagree with anything you said, Douglas. I suspect that no one around this table underestimates the importance of the agriculture industry and local farms to the local economy. James said in his presentation that there are 3,000 farm businesses in Fermanagh, of which 300 are dairy farms. I suspect that the great majority, if not all of them, are family-run enterprises.

Mr Murphy: Without a doubt, yes.

Lord Morrow: That is important, not only to the Fermanagh economy but to the whole economy in Northern Ireland. There is something wrong with a situation where the people who are most affected are either the last to be consulted or are not consulted at all. We, as a Committee, have a duty and responsibility of care to ensure that that changes or does not happen.

Mr Murphy: To be clear, there was a consultation through the summer, and our farmers' union made representation to it. The Chairwoman's point about the Department actually coming down and laying out plans or thoughts on how it will proceed — there has been nothing like that.

The Chairperson: That is a very poor show from the Department. The main issue is that, if it wants to sell this to you, it has to do more, have face-to-face engagement, allay fears and give you more information. That has been lacking in the past.

Mr Rowe: We do not want this to be sold to us. We want it killed.

The Chairperson: The Department wants to sell it to you, or the Minister wants to sell it to you.

Mr Rowe: No. The Department wants to build another ivory tower for itself. That is at the back of this. We do not need any more ivory towers.

Mr Molloy: I want to make a wee point about what Lord Morrow said. When we spoke to the chief executive of the management group at the Lake District and Lake Windermere, he said that they, as the management people, know best what the local area needs. That summed up the attitude towards partnership.

The Chairperson: Dolores, can we have a brief question, please?

Mrs D Kelly: With due respect, I have been very patient. We have to put this into some perspective, and, as James said in his opening remarks, part of the difficulty was that we were operating somewhat in the dark because we have not seen the shape or make-up of a national park as yet. It is worthy of note that this is the only part of these islands that does not have a national park, and it is also fair to say that the Minister has made it very clear that there will be consultation and discussion and no further restrictions. I do not want to have an over-emotional argument without having the facts in front of us, and we do not, unfortunately, have the facts because we have not yet seen the proposals.

I have looked at the manifestos of a number of other parties, and the Executive have a commitment to Northern Ireland as a tourism destination. It is about brand selling. I also live in a rural area, albeit, unfortunately, not one that could have a national park. However, we have areas of special scientific interest quite considerably in the area in which I live, and I am aware of the restrictions and of the concerns that local landowners have about that. There is a responsibility on us, as MLAs, not only to represent the people who elected us but to have a leadership role on wider decision-making in the interests of everyone.

I want to reiterate what my party colleague, who is the Minister, said in the past. He will have widespread consultation, and it will not be lifted off the shelf from England, Scotland or the South of Ireland. It will be fit for purpose and will address the concerns, if there is to be a national parks designation, of the people who live in those areas. People need to hear that and understand it. That is my only comment at this stage.

Mr Rowe: May I reply to Mrs Kelly's comments with a specific incident? I hate speaking again, but I am going to do it.

Back in 2002, I represented the union in a lot of places. I did so in front of this very Committee, on a thing called the farm nutrient management scheme. The Department that your Minister now heads was putting through proposals. We brought the proposals and the consultation to this Committee and, on that day — I am not sure how many members are still with the Committee; Francie might have been there — the Chairman made the civil servants promise that they would look at what they were proposing, modify it and bring it back to the participating members — the farmers of Northern Ireland — at the time.

The Assembly fell. The civil servants who had been entrusted with that business came back, met us and rode roughshod over us with their proposals. Legislation that is put on the statute book, whether beefed up or not, will empower civil servants — I use the phrase widely because they may be in the management team — to do the same.

This legislation needs to be killed right at the start, because you are empowering people to have control over private individuals. I am a private individual who does quite a lot of work with the Department of the Environment in tourism, because I own a very important tourist site in Fermanagh. I have first-hand knowledge of how they work, and there is no way that I, or any of the farmers in Fermanagh whom we represent — every blessed one of them — want this legislation. Your Minister needs to take it off the table.

Mrs D Kelly: I appreciate that Mr Rowe is coming from previous experience. I would like to assure him that our Minister intends to be in charge of his Department and not to have his Department in charge of him. He has proved that in the past with the decisions that he has made in other areas.

Mr Rowe: He will not be there forever. The problem is that I hope that we will be.

Mrs D Kelly: Unless Alasdair has been on the phone to you, I think we can be sure that he will be there for a while. It is about getting everything right.

The Chairperson: There will always be a Committee to scrutinise legislation, Mr Rowe.

Mr Rowe: Yes, but the Committee will not be on the ground when the member of staff from the Department is standing at my elbow telling me what to do. I have lots of experience of that.

Mrs D Kelly: I think we have heard that before.

Mr Rowe: It is nearly at the stage where they will be hanging like crows from bushes as a warning to others. That is as far as I have got with the Department.

The Chairperson: I know that you are very concerned, but from what I took away last week, the two authorities should be enabling bodies to help farmers and local businesses to grow. It is not about people coming down on you and telling you what to do. It is about talking with you and having all sides working together for the common good of the whole area.

Mr Rowe: Chairperson, I have spoken but you obviously have not heard.

Lord Morrow: I thought you were going to speak again.

Mr Boylan: I think Fermanagh says no, Chair, to be honest with you.

The Chairperson: Yes. OK. Thank you very much. It has been very good to talk to you and to hear your views.