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The Speaker  
Room 39 Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast,  
BT4 3XX

4<sup>th</sup> February 2021

Dear Mr Speaker,

### **Public Consultation - Private Members Bill to Ban Hunting of Wild Mammals with Dogs**

The Ulster Farmers' Union (UFU) is the largest farming organisation in Northern Ireland (NI) representing approximately 11,500 farming families. The UFU represents farmers from all areas of Northern Ireland, across all sectors and has a vision of a productive, profitable and progressive farming sector.

I am writing to you regarding the Private Members Bill proposal from Mr John Blair MLA. The Bill seeks to introduce legislation to ban hunting mammals with dogs in NI. The Bill if passed, would also ban trail hunting, outlaw flushing with dogs for pest control and even potentially prohibit other pest control methods such as snares. The UFU have written to Mr Blair, outlining concerns regarding his proposal, however we also believe the way in which he is collecting public opinion is flawed.

Online surveys are a common method used to quickly collect data across a large geographical area, however the UFU have several concerns regarding this online survey:

**The intention/ aims of the legislation** - The preamble claims that the proposed legislation in NI will address the weaknesses of the Scottish (Protecting of Wild Mammals (Scotland) Act 2002) and Westminster (The Hunting Act 2004, England and Wales) Acts. Mr Blair does not identify these '*weaknesses*', so it is impossible to know exactly what he is proposing. In addition, there are '*possible exemptions*' to the proposed legislation, which are also not stated. The aims and intentions of the Bill are conflicting; the preamble begins by stating the Bill will ban the hunting of wild animals with dogs, trail hunting and flushing with dogs for pest control. Then, in the final paragraph it states '*the intention of the Bill is to ban hunting live mammals with dogs*', and does not mention trail hunting.

**The evidence and background** – The preamble to the survey states '*there has been a strong lobby in NI to ban hunting with dogs, and other cruel sports*'. There is no evidence provided to prove this statement, such as lobby groups and campaigns; and the Survation study results quoted, are from a survey commissioned by the League Against Cruel Sports. This is not made known in the preamble to the respondent.

The preamble also states '*there is also strong support from the farming community to ban hunting with dogs*.' There has been no engagement with UFU on this subject and as the largest democratic voluntary organisation representing farmers and growers in NI, it is difficult to understand how such a statement can be made.

Highlighted are a variety of issues that farmers have raised, while we have concerns regarding the source of this information, the UFU recognise that issues between landowners and hunts can arise. However, the UFU has a long standing Memorandum of Understanding with the Countryside Alliance and The Northern Ireland Masters of Hounds Association, meaning problems can be raised by landowners and rectified quickly. The UFU cannot accept the statement ‘ *hunting with dogs also presents a significant biosecurity threat to livestock when hunts trample from one farm to another, potentially spreading disease.*’ It is the landowners decision as to whether or not the hunt can travel across their land; farmers would not grant access if there was a biosecurity risk to their business. Private landowners have granted access to the countryside for other recreational activities such as dog walking, and dogs whether pets or hounds, have the same ability to spread disease and worry livestock. Should all dogs not owned by the farmer be prohibited on farmland? In fact, an individual walker presents a greater biosecurity risk to a farm than a hunt, as the farmer is not likely to know who or when the walking route is used. If the hunt crosses farmland, the landowner will know in advance and can contact the hunt should a disease outbreak occur. In the event of a disease outbreak the farmer, the hunt and the farm vet can work together to identify the source and progress a solution.

**The content of the questionnaire** - The outcome of the survey appears predetermined and encourages respondents to confirm Mr Blair’s position. The questions are biased making it difficult for respondents to challenge Mr Blair’s position.

**The respondents** – The methodology of this research is not clear. Who has the survey been shared with? This survey appears to be online only, with no option to request a paper copy or details of who to contact with questions. An online only survey restricts the sample of people surveyed and the validity of results. In addition, the survey does not collect enough demographic information about the respondent to analyse the data. Respondents could be from outside NI and should not necessarily have a say in legislation affecting people in NI.

Overall, it appears that statements have been made with no or inadequate evidence to support them. This greatly impacts a respondents ability to respond if they are not fully or accurately informed and in turn affects the validity of the data collected.

If Mr Blair wishes to bring this Bill forward, his consultation process needs to be improved. MLA’S require information both in favour and against the Bill to make an informed decision, and the results of a public survey which has been created with validity in mind and not the preferred outcome. The process in which he is following does not seem adequate to potentially form legislation.

If you require any further information, please do not hesitate to get in contact.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Victor Bestwell". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping flourish at the end.

UFU President