

‘Where we are at now is good, but it’s under threat. What I’m worried about is a clearance. Not cruelty, but a series of government legislations, that, if not challenged, will mean that in thirty, forty years time, we will not have farmers living on our fells, or very, very few.’

That’s a bold way to begin a conversation about the state of upland farming in the Lake District, but Rory Stewart, MP for Penrith and the Borders, believes passionately that it’s time for action. He knows his constituency intimately, having covered three- or four-hundred miles on foot in the last five years.

I’m worried that in thirty, forty years time, we will not have farmers living on our fells – or very, very few

‘If you walk from Bailey by Bewcastle over the watershed into Scotland, you go from a valley which is densely patterned with farmhouses and activity – families like the Telfords that have been there since 1720 – you cross the watershed and the landscape is empty. It’s the same land, but there are barely any farmhouses to be seen. Suddenly you’re into a world of 2000-acre tenant farms. Where in 1600 there were two and a half thousand people farming, now you’ll have 50 or 60. This is happening because of SSSI legislation, hill farming schemes, biodiversity targets, carbon capture targets, and even the policy towards water management: policies that reduce stocking levels on the fellside and make it more and more difficult for people to make a sustainable productive living out of sheep farming – it’s paying people increasingly to do nothing.’

Policies that reduce stocking levels on the fellside make it more and more difficult for people to make a sustainable productive living out of sheep farming – it’s paying people increasingly to do nothing.

This is a view we’ve heard time and time again from farmers. Rory continues, leaning forward in his chair with his arms fully outstretched and his eyes wide: ‘One of these guys in the agencies said to me, *Rory, you’re going to have to face it, it’s going to look more like the highlands of Scotland.*’ Rory draws a long, deep breath, and looks at us searchingly, his eyebrows creasing into a question mark. ‘Why on earth would you want that? You go to the highlands of Scotland if you want to see them – you come to the Lake District to see the Lake District.’

It’s impossible to disagree. But I want to know, how do the policy makers take the farmers’ knowledge into account? ‘It’s not a level playing field,’ says Rory. ‘The money is with the state. They have every advantage: prestige, authority, degrees, cash, they’re up on the latest targets, plans and strategic visions. If you talk to the agencies they say they are consultative and talk to farmers but the reality remains: these consultations and conversations are at their worst pseudo colonial. The farmers, by their very nature, don’t have access to the same money, power or information, are not in the centre of those discussions, and are split into a thousand independent units.’

Rory’s concern is that the focus is on conserving the landscape, with its biodiversity, at the expense of farming. Reducing stock numbers by 50-75% (which is what is suggested under some of the most recent schemes imposed by Natural England) will leave us ‘in a different world’. If, or when, subsidies cease, ‘the fellside will have been wrecked, taken over by indigestible tufts of white-green

grass, the gorse will have spread, there won't be the people who have the flocks or the interest to move back into what will then be a wilderness.'

'The challenge is, how do you create real opposition to a world where there is so much power and jargon and money on one side, with the people on the other side saying, 'This is my land, I've lived here for a very long time, I understand it very well, and this is what I do'.

He talks about the unique qualities of upland farmers in Cumbria. 'There's a sense of permanence and a sense of commitment in a world where everybody else is highly mobile, slipping in and out of jobs, changing place, changing role. It's a very rare part of society. And the level of commitment again is rare. They are deeply aware of what has gone into creating this landscape, how walls and fences are structured, how different bits of ground work, exactly when you separate the yows from the lambs, exactly how many yows you can put on this or that field, what condition you're expecting the grass to be in before you do any of these things ... That's the core. Allied to that, you have an interesting group of young farmers, who are beginning to do some fascinating bits of innovation.'

The challenge is, how do you create real opposition to a world where there is so much power and jargon and money on one side, with the people on the other side saying, 'This is my land, I've lived here for a very long time, I understand it very well, and this is what I do'.

'The way to resolve the problem of stocking levels is not to pretend there isn't any conflict, the way to resolve this is to plan, and planning means designating landscapes. It means getting to a situation where, eventually, grown-ups sit around the table and actually go around twenty valleys talking about what you want to achieve in each one, instead of taking a single, blunt, catch-all approach. For instance, you might decide Swindale is going to be a RSPB sanctuary; the back of Blancathra and Skiddaw is going to look like the highlands of Scotland; the Ullswater catchment is going to remain a closely cropped area where what's prioritised is sheep farming...'

Rory believes that bodies like the National Trust, the Lake District National Park and Natural England need to be put under continued pressure to work towards such a balance. He doesn't mince his words. 'The National Trust needs to have its feet held to the fire. The National Trust, for example, exists for the nation – it, of any landowner, should be able to look beyond the short-term commercial consideration and beyond fashions in water management and biodiversity, into its longer term obligation to our culture and our landscape.'

And this is the crux of it: like the farmers, Rory takes a long-term view. More often than not, Cumbrian farmers see themselves as custodians. Sure, they want to run successful businesses and put food on the table, but the Cumbrian tradition of hill farming is about looking after the land so you can pass it on to the next generation in a good, and preferably improved, condition, just as when you borrow a ram for the tuppings season, you're expected to pass it back to its owner in fine fettle.

As one farmer told us early on in the project, *the best kind of farming is the kind of farming that allows you to farm in the future*. Farming with this intention preserves a lot more than the land: it protects a unique culture that is allied to a beautiful and unique landscape and a specialised system of sheep farming. It deserves support.