

A charaid,

In his column last week (**WHFP1673**) Brian Wilson highlighted Crispin Agnew's contribution to the crofting reform process at the Scottish Parliament earlier this month. Mr Agnew proposed that crofting tenure could be replaced by owner-occupancy, citing the unregulated landholding system in Ireland as a model for owner occupancy.

Mr Wilson then questioned how successful the Irish model has been for retaining population in areas of Ireland, such as Donegal, that are similar to the crofting counties.

The electoral division of Termone in Donegal is within sight of the Scottish islands of Islay and Jura, and is made up of 8 townlands (equivalent to crofting townships).

At the time of the first Irish Free State census in 1926 there were 818 people living in the Termone area. By the time of the latest census, in 2006, the number of people in Termone had fallen to just 297. That massive loss of population occurred under an unregulated owner-occupancy system.

In part this decline can be attributed to the tendency for smaller families in this part of Donegal these days. However, there are other significant factors.

In one of the Termone townlands is a clachan called Cnocameala - 'the hill of the honey' . All four houses here are closed now. One house is already in ruins and another is close to ruin. The last old man who lived in the clachan died around five years ago. My ex-landlord, who is in his late forties and spent much of his youth in Cnocameala, remembers when there were four families there. In his father's time at least 50 people lived in the place.

There are six people in a neighbouring clachan - including two bachelors over the age of fifty. However, in the late 1950s the area was home to more than 50 people, some of them living in three houses that are now in ruins.

Yet four big new houses have gone up in that this area in the last 10 years. All of them are holiday homes and empty for the great majority of the year. Last year a local farmer told me how his son had just sold a house for more than €300,000. Of course, at that price it had not gone to a local person. All this happened under an unregulated owner-occupancy system.

The farmer's son was lucky he sold when he did. Donegal's economic revival was based on an unsustainable construction boom that has gone bust spectacularly. The county's unemployment figures almost doubled in the year between July 2008 and 2009. In north Donegal there has been a 384 per cent increase in unemployment among under 25s. Emigration is rife.

Development polices in the crofting areas have for the last decade been 'community centric', with common grazings being proposed and used for appropriate scale affordable housing, commercial and energy projects.

Meanwhile, the people of Ireland, as Brian Wilson noted last week, were being encouraged to put all their eggs in a development basket held together by human greed and the free market in land. The bottom has just fallen out of the basket, and out of many Irish communities. It also, in my opinion, takes the bottom out of Crispin Agnew's argument for the Irish model of land tenure.

Iain MacFhionghuin

Quay Street
Merville
County Donegal
Ireland