

A balance of rewards and responsibility

IT IS WIDELY ACCEPTED that the right to buy introduced in 1976 created a loophole to avoid regulation and started the demise of crofting as a regulated system.

Just as important, and often over-looked, is the fact that the right to assign outwith the family introduced in 1961 led to the free market in croft tenancies and so to the end of a truly regulated, and protected, system.

A regulated system can only work by a balance of rewards and responsibility. A hundred-plus years ago security of tenure, compensation for improvements and controlled rents were the rewards for putting up with the regulations. The Crofting Counties Agricultural Grant Scheme (CCAGS) was specifically set up to help develop holdings in the most remote and challenged areas of Scotland. Now CCAGS is the main part of the reward for regulation but the Scottish Government, with the support of the large-farm lobby, want it to go, to be replaced by a scheme that is open to all farms below 50ha in size, no matter where they are in Scotland. If CCAGS goes, crofters may well feel that there is no justification for the responsibilities and regulation.

Were crofters to ask for de-regulation, the Scottish Government would undoubtedly be delighted, as would their puppeteer the NFUS. Has this been the intention all along? Why has the 2010 legislation turned out to be such a fiasco? With the list of errors discovered in the 2010 act mounting, the question

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Crofters warned to speak up or get shafted

CROFTING IS under threat, probably as never before.

Time is running out. All crofters are urged to stand united to face this danger. The Scottish Crofting Federation is warning all crofters to respond to the Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) consultations or risk being cheated of what is rightfully theirs. By the time you read this the Scotland Rural Development Programme (SRDP) consultation will be closed, but if you didn't respond to it you can still send a letter to Richard Lochhead, cabinet secretary for agriculture. And please respond to the direct payments consultation which is open until 17th March.

Crofters need to wake up to what is being suggested by the Scottish Government. The objective in the European Commission, right from the outset of these protracted negotiations, has been to provide more support to small producers. But gradually the large farmers' representatives have eroded this intention.

In Scotland it is the same. We were led to believe that crofters were to get real and equitable support at last. But in the short time between the first consultations and this second stage, the large farmers' representatives have stepped up lobbying pressure in a desperate attempt to keep the money. The Scottish Government seems to be bowing to this. If crofters don't speak up they will get shafted.

For example, in the pillar one consultation

on direct payments, it is suggested that the rough grazing classification – which most croft land is – should be supported to the tune of 20 to 25 euros per hectare, whilst permanent grassland and arable, where most intensive large farms are, should get from 200 to 250 euros per hectare. Crofters have not been asking for much; just enough to survive. We estimate this to be 30 to 35 five euros per hectare. But the large-farm lobby won't tolerate even this. It is blatant greed. In the negotiations, NFUS have suggested that crofters can survive on 15 euros per hectare!

In some respects, the pillar two consultation, on the SRDP is even more of a slap in the face. It is being proposed that the crofters' agricultural support scheme, CCAGS, will be wound up and replaced with a scheme that will be open to all farms in Scotland of less than fifty hectares. That is seventy three percent of holdings.

The large-farm lobby have always made it clear that they do not like crofters having their own scheme and do not value crofting as a unique way of rural life. In the cross-party group report on SRDP, in which organisations suggested a croft-only support scheme, NFUS stood out as the lone organisation demanding it be open to all. In the phase one consultation many organisations and

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