

Crofting Commission collapses as a credible regulator



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FOUR YEARS AGO, at the assessors' conference, we met for the first time our new, largely elected, Crofting Commission.

It was an occasion of great optimism. We had people responsible for the governance of our precious crofting system who, it seemed, believed in it with a passion, would preserve and defend it – and had a vision for its strong and sustainable future. Four years on that vision has turned to nightmare. Crofting is mired in existential crisis. The catastrophe of Brexit threatens marginal agriculture in all the nations of the UK; and for crofters it comes on top of the collapse of our Commission as a credible regulator.

That crisis is nowhere more starkly manifest than in our common grazings. This huge land resource, which is within the control of crofting communities, is capable of transforming the futures of some of our most remote and challenged regions. The choice is clear. A common grazing can either be the fiefdom of an ever-dwindling number of graziers, or it can be a sustainable source of income helping to ensure the future of crofting and the retention of a demographically balanced, economically active population. Forestry, renewable energy, stock clubs, affordable housing; these are some of the developments that townships have pursued with huge success. And here's the thing; they

are entirely compatible with, and in many cases actually improve, traditional livestock grazing.

These things are only possible where townships have democratic control over their finances. Significantly, those townships whose grazings committees were summarily dismissed by the Commission were pursuing just such diversified projects. In the past they would have probably been case studies in a glossy annual report. The Commission took the view that the interests of absentees and of nihilistic minorities took precedence over the future of crofting and communities, and they did so with a

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The Crofting Commission convener crisis

IN HIS LATEST statements to the media, Colin Kennedy, the convener of the Crofting Commission, has said that he has no intention to stand down, despite widespread calls for his resignation.

He refutes any wrong doing and claims to have operated within the law, notwithstanding the fact that lawyers and the cabinet secretary for crofting, Fergus Ewing, who is himself from a legal background, have said he is wrong. Kennedy has accused the Scottish Government of legal wrongdoing and suggests that the cabinet secretary should resign. Kennedy has no legal background, but an astonishing amount of arrogance matched only by his shamelessness.

This is all very confusing for onlookers. Colin Kennedy was rebuked by the cabinet secretary

for the way in which he handled issues with common grazings committees. Mr Ewing disagreed with Kennedy's interpretation of the law and suggested that an apology from the Commission was due to crofters affected by the mistreatment. The apology would be expected to come from Colin Kennedy, as one of the duties of the convener is to speak for the Commission.

At the board meeting that this apology was due to be made, Kennedy walked out. The board reconvened and jointly issued a request to the convener to stand down. Kennedy has said on the BBC that he had no knowledge of the fact that his fellow commissioners have no confidence in him. He must be the only person in Scotland who hadn't heard that the commissioners unanimously agreed that he should stand down.

Despite this vote of no-confidence, Kennedy has remained in place and has launched a vicious counter-attack. As expected he appears to be trying to pass the blame for the whole fiasco to his fellow commissioners, to the CEO, who has left the Commission for a new job, to the cabinet secretary and to the staff of the Crofting Commission. Everyone is to blame but him. In outbursts to the media he accuses everyone in the Commission of misconduct, even though he has been responsible for how the Commission operates since the ousting of Susan Walker, the previous convener, back in May 2015. His latest move is to issue a formal complaint against the cabinet secretary, accusing Mr Ewing of being

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