

NFUS CONFERENCE: FARMING AND CROFTING IN SCOTLAND'S HILLS AND ISLANDS - THE WAY AHEAD

OBAN, 14 JUNE 1996

THE NATURAL HERITAGE PERSPECTIVE: ROGER CROFTS, SNH

Introduction

Sandy, thank-you very much indeed. It is said that the after lunch session is the coffin spot not made better by being introduced as an Englishman with a beard to talk about green issues and not BSE, working in an office in Edinburgh.

Of course we all know that the most important species in the Highlands and Islands of Scotland are the birds and the mammals and all the rest of it don't we? And you'll all put your hands up in agreement with that won't you? Well we agree on one thing then because it is the native species that are most important and that is the people as well as the native plants and the animals. Without them we cannot achieve what we want to achieve. So the answer to the question "do we need support for farming in the Highlands and Islands?" is an unequivocal "yes" from us as an environmental body. But it is the wrong question. The question really should be "what should be the role of farmers and crofters and how can Governments best support those roles?"

In Scottish Natural Heritage our starting point inevitably has to be that the natural heritage of Scotland is a major asset. It is one of your great capital assets. And I do hope that it has an impact on farm capital values and I see members of the valuation profession here and I hope they will make sure that this factor is taken into account in the future. Wildlife should not be a negative in farm values, it should actually be a positive, but we have got a long way to go to achieve that position.

One of the things which you will be confronting, as we are at the moment, are the implications of Directives from Brussels on birds and on habitat and species and the very much tougher Regulations. I know that our role and the role of my staff who are here today and elsewhere in Scotland can adversely affect your perception of our attitude to farming and crofting. My plea in mitigation, if you like, is that our approach is to work with you, our partners. We had a major consultation exercise last year. I do realise that it probably got in the way of your lambing but I am afraid that The Scottish Office has to answer for the timing of it. We are here, with your help, to deliver Government obligations in some special parts of Scotland.

But the critical thing which I want to emphasise at the outset is that we cannot manage the natural heritage resource on its own. It is not really natural much of it, most of it is the result of your activities and the activities of your forefathers and it will continue to be so for your successors as well. In fact we are dealing with managed land for the most part and that is vital. Without that management we will not get the benefit for wildlife and landscape which the Government has asked us to look after. Surely none of us want to see what is happening in some other countries in the western world. Countries like France for instance where there is wholesale abandonment of land because the farm enterprises are not viable. I hope that I can

strike a cord with you right at the outset therefore by making it quite clear that you, the farmers and the crofters in the hills and uplands of Scotland, are a vital species to help us deliver our responsibilities for nature, for landscape and for public recreation.

Issues facing hill and island agriculture

It therefore goes without saying that the issues which are facing you now are ones that we have to seriously address. We cannot turn our back on things like BSE, on declining farm incomes, on ever increasing costs, on reductions in manpower in the uplands. We have to think very hard about how we can help you and how we can jointly through the NFU for Scotland seek to persuade the Agriculture Department to make improvements. I will make some suggestions as part of a common agenda which I hope that both of our interest groups will share.

There are many other issues which have been mentioned this morning. We are very concerned about lower management inputs which are available for the husbandry of stock and of grazing land. As a result of the effects on your income levels and the continual de-manning we were very concerned, even before BSE, of the limited incentives in practice for keeping cattle alongside sheep. Of course because of BSE that factor is now in very stark perspective. When I was asked at lunchtime by Ken Rundle what our view about cattle in the uplands was, I gave an unequivocal yes that we must have them and we must continue to have them because the mixed husbandry which cattle and sheep together bring is vitally important for the maintenance of the herbage, for the manuring regime and therefore for the benefits to wildlife. Unfortunately the current regime results in the maintenance of high stocking numbers and this appears at the moment to be the only means which you have of retaining income. Now, Mr President, I do not want to get into the argument as to whether we should have headage payments or area payments. I think in some respects it is an argument of the past. We have often been asked for our view, perhaps some way between the perfect of the NFUS and the good of the SLF who I know have differing views on this issue. The real point is how we can maintain incomes to allow the farmers in these areas to do their job. It is quite clear for instance that the Environmentally Sensitive Area schemes are good in theory but they actually are not delivering in practice. Many of you know about the substantial underspend of a significant amount of public money on this but it returns to the Treasury and none of us, least of all an Englishman who is desperately Scottish, wants money to go back to that place, thank you very much. We want it to be used here but there must be something wrong with the incentive regime, if not the prescriptions, if we have this level of underspend. It is doing you no benefit, it is doing the environment no benefit and it is not helping us to do our job.

There is of course the knotty question of access provision. There are some modest, or unduly modest, payments in some of the ESAs for that purpose. I well recognise that many of you have faced the problem of people trampling over your land. Some of them well intentioned, others of them disregarding what you are trying to achieve in your very disadvantageous position. None of the current support adequately addresses this issue. So that is another issue which we both share.

Common ground between agriculture and natural heritage interests

I believe that there is much common ground between agriculture and natural heritage interests. It is why at the very outset of Scottish Natural Heritage my Chairman, Magnus Magnusson, and Sandy's predecessor, John Ross signed an accord. Without your support, without your work, we cannot do our job. You are recognising the importance of the environment in, for instance, your policy statement published last November. And we are recognising the importance of your role, for example, in our policy statements (you can get a copy at our stand at the back of the room) shows that there is a great deal of common ground. I do hope that your concerns about BSE, which are very well founded and I am profoundly sorry for you in the position which you face, will not push everything else off the agenda. If I read anything into Philip Rycroft's speech this morning it was that the speed of change in the CAP may be faster than perhaps any of us had imagined and certainly much faster than we had been led to believe by officials in the Agriculture Department. So we must be prepared for those changes, we must have our own agenda of what is appropriate for agriculture in the uplands and hills and islands of Scotland and I hope that agenda can be a shared one.

I wish to spell out some of those elements of a shared agenda as I see it from a natural heritage viewpoint.

First and foremost has to be the development of viable enterprises and rural communities in the longer term. Without that, to be perfectly honest, we are never going to achieve the well-being of the environment which I am sure you all share as did your predecessors. At the moment that is not possible. The support regimes are in many respects mistargeted. Despite £450 million of support into agriculture in Scotland, only about £15 million goes into agri-environment and yet we and Lord Lindsay and his officials are expecting you to be environmental managers.

So clearly, we need a better funded and all-embracing agri-environment scheme. I do happen to believe that the Scottish Countryside Premium Scheme is a very important step forward. It does have echoes into Tir Cymen which was devised by our sister agency in Wales. But there are some requirements which must be fulfilled if the scheme is to succeed and this Mr President is where, I think, we share many things in common.

We want to have a much higher uptake of this scheme than the previous schemes but to do that more resources are required from Government, we need to shift the balance in resources therefore from non-agriculture and non-environment issues into these issues. Surely in the run-up to a General Election that is something we should be arguing for, not for redistributing within a small pot but for making the pot bigger and then allowing some redistribution in that enlarged pot.

You will not respond to all of these schemes, I am quite clear, unless there are more attractive incentives for the agri-environment schemes. The increased rates proposed by Government for ESAs, I hope, might help but I have very profound doubts from what I hear from the farming community. We must therefore keep up our arguments jointly to Government: that the incentive levels must be increased, that the schemes must be available throughout the country and that in those parts of the country which are of the highest natural heritage significance and are of

European and international benefit those areas should receive higher levels of incentive. I cannot expect you to respond positively to my staff coming round talking to you if you are going to have to respond to the demands of those European Directives on a shoestring. I believe that we must jointly lobby Government on these issues. I am not sure that we will get anywhere.

It is now about 18 months since your predecessor, President, and my Chairman jointly signed a letter to The Scottish Office Agriculture and Environment Department asking for some forward thinking on geese. Your silence is apposite because that is what we have had: silence. We must force these issues with Government. If we move jointly then I would like to think that tactically we have a pincer movement to get these important issues addressed. There is no point in accepting that there is an ESA for instance on Islay, and I have to mention this in front of this audience, which does not work because SNH has an incentive scheme which I know is not as high as farmers would like it but is still very significant on a large part of our budget. Surely an agri-environment scheme is all about solving those issues which have not been fully addressed at the moment. We must continue, Mr President, to force this issue.

We also need to make sure that our advisers act with enthusiasm and versatility in stimulating your interests in agri-environment schemes. Here I am thinking particularly of my own staff but also of the Scottish Agricultural College and its Advisory Services and also that service which both organisations jointly fund: FWAG. Without an increasing number of advisers, necessarily largely paid for out of the public purse, frankly I do not see how we can expect you to respond through different forms of management on the ground. We need to make sure that those advisers are not just trained in good environmental and ecological management but in dealing with you on a positive and imaginative basis and understanding quite clearly what drives you, what your worries and concerns are. Without that they will never get the message through.

We also need a changed basis for the support of farming in the hills and islands. I know that many people are very nervous about decoupling financial support for production. My point really is that we need greater incentives for stock management and for herbage management. I suggest that headage payments should not be for sheep, but for shepherds and maybe for orramen and cattlemen because it is those sorts of activities which are vitally important to deliver what we would like to see. It would also benefit local communities in the Highlands and Islands. It is not a matter of just allowing market forces to play because I know, just as well as you do, that you will lose out. The New Zealanders will knock spots off you and if the lowland guys get into livestock, well then you do not stand a chance on earth to be perfectly honest. There needs therefore to be not maintenance of the present support regime but a creative relook at the support regime. What sort of support should we be looking for? What do we want in CAP mark 3 (that might come in the early part of next century) which gives you and particularly your successors, your sons on the farm, some prospect that you will still be in business in 10 or 20 years time rather than worrying that you may not be in business at the end of the calendar year after the further sales?

Part of the answer also has to be an adoption of the Environmental Quality Assurance Scheme. This is not just quality assurance of stock management,

although that is important and the consumer surely in the longer term must respond more positively to it and of course the supermarkets have a major lever on it. Beyond that, given the greenness of the urban population as it likes to see itself, then quality assurance of the environment and its management on farms and crofts is important as well. This does mean also, and maybe this is a slightly negative note which might jar with you but I wouldn't be honest if I didn't mention, is that there are parts of the country where grazing levels have led to a deterioration in habitats and natural forage. We have a role to play there, to advise you on how you can recognise this issue and some of the advisory notes on our stand at the back of the room try to address this issue.

Facilitating access to farm and croft ground is also a major issue, it is not one which can be dumped. I am very pleased to acknowledge the support from the National Farmers Union of Scotland for their contribution to the "Concordat on access to the hills and mountains" and for being and continuing to be members, through Ian Melrose, of the Access Forum. This is a good way forward: where the various interests can get round the table and begin to listen to each other rather than shout at each other. It will be difficult, the Ramblers have their own agenda: you know that, I know that. At the end of the day you own the land, you manage the land and the accommodation has to be with you. That's why we have employed Bell Ingram to work out a code for getting access for the public across land. We want to work with you to increase footpaths on farmland but to give you the reassurance that this will work to your benefit rather than to your disadvantage.

I also believe that, even though I know you are terribly adaptable and have proved that over the years, that at times you maybe need more technical support, more training from the training agencies to help you address these new issues: the so-called multi-objective agriculture.

Last but by no means least is that Scottish Natural Heritage needs to continue to increase its knowledge and appreciation of hill and island farming issues. I would see that as a training opportunity for SAC. But we are moving forward. For example, we have a series of action programmes on the ground. Sarah Allen who is running our demonstration projects in the north-west mainland will be able to tell you about them and I hope you will pick up the brochures. I know full well that the best way to influence you is to ask you to look over the dyke to seek new forms of activity, new practices with our support being undertaken by your fellow farmers and crofters. We do have a role in giving advice to you, we are not trying to pontificate and tell you what to do, we need to know what sort of advice you would find helpful and how you would like that advice as well. So feedback from you is vitally important. I hope today therefore that you will take the advantage of speaking to my colleagues that are here. But more particularly I hope that you will go and chap on the door of the SNH offices, 40 of them spread around Scotland. If you do not know who your local area officer is, well can I ask you to please go and find out because then we can develop and further the partnership which has already begun. This will mean that in the long term, despite short term hiccups and problems in Europe and problems in the market-place, that we will have viable hill and island farming communities which produce food and which look after the environment in the long term. That I believe is our shared vision Mr President and I hope that you will all share it. Thank you very much.

