

Crofting Grazings put in Jeopardy by the Commission

You may recall my column last month 'Crofting Under Attack', listing several issues where crofting on the islands is being threatened, either directly or by neglect. Now we have an astonishing assault on crofting by the crofting regulator itself, which recently launched a campaign against grazings committees resulting in the sacking at least two of them. This has taken place on Lewis but the implications are far reaching.

The press made us all aware of the grievances raised by the Lewis Upper Coll grazings committee members against the convener of the commission, Colin Kennedy. The resultant sacking of the committee looks, on the face of it, like an appalling attempt by the commission to nullify the complaint. The commission made an unprecedented demand for five years of audited accounts, though there had been no indication of financial shenanigans. Whatever is actually behind their decision, it is a staggeringly clumsy exercise in public relations.

Following on from the Upper Coll disclosure, it transpires that there was a similar occurrence with the Mangersta Grazings Committee. Mr Kennedy was again involved and, following inconsistent and bullish demands by the commission, it led to the committee being removed from office.

What on earth is going on? How many others are there who have been intimidated and bullied into submission under threat of removal?

There appears to have been no transparency or genuine attempts to resolve the situations that instigated the commission's involvement and it rings very loud warning bells of a return to the old Crofters Commission regime, which was regularly accused of operating on a similar autocratic basis. With the election of commissioners we very much hoped that we would never see this sort of behaviour again.

A direction of such gravity must have been sanctioned by the commissioners themselves so we call on them to explain the action. There are questions that need to be answered to go any way to alleviating crofter's fears. How were the complaints raised against Mr Kennedy dealt with and by whom -were the complaints looked at by an independent body? What was Mr Kennedy's involvement in the sackings? Did he declare an interest and take no part in the commissioners' decision? What part does the Western Isles commissioner, Murdo MacLennan, play in this? He was asked for help by the Upper Coll grazings committee but did nothing and has remained silent since.

It is clear that there has to be a review by the Scottish Government of how the commission works and what its objective is.

As I have said, this has far reaching implications for common grazings and for crofting. The commission are probably acting within the letter, but certainly not within the spirit, of the law. If they continue with this strategy it will lead to the breakdown of regulated common grazings and we are struggling to maintain, and to form new, grazings committees as it is. If we have no regulated grazings what would be the purpose of a regulator?