

LAND USE IN THE HIGHLANDS

Earlier this year the Highlands and Islands Development Board published a review* of its policy towards land use. This document is noteworthy in two respects. First, for the frankness with which the Board recognises the limits of its powers. The Board is only one among more than a score of public institutions charged with the exercise of economic and social responsibilities in the region. Nor can it compare in influence with those individuals, private institutions and public bodies who directly control the use of the region's land resources.

Secondly, the Board is asking for its powers to be extended, along the lines of New Town Development Corporations, so that it may have the right to acquire land by compulsory purchase. It points out that there are many examples of the mismanagement of land limiting the development of rural communities. It points out that even a successful expansion of the output of primary activities such as farming, forestry and fishing will not be sufficient to sustain a rural population. What is required is a comprehensive approach to development in which expansion of the quantity and quality of primary products is augmented by the local processing of these products and is related to those other income-earning activities which are available to families in the marginal rural areas, (such as the provision of small-scale tourist services).

One has only to think of Raasay, Mull and large parts of the mainland to appreciate the value of this proposal. Indeed, most readers of the bulletin may be surprised to learn that the Board is only now, some twelve years after it came into existence, proposing to take these steps. Most people probably assumed that the Board already had the powers to carry such proposals into practice.

Sadly, it seems that the Board entertains little hope that the powers it requests will actually be granted: "The proposals relating to land acquisition in particular have given rise to

* "Highland Agriculture and Land Use", Occasional Bulletin 7, Highlands & Islands Development Board, Inverness. 40p.

more discussion than any other single policy proposal and it would be wrong to expect an early resolution of the acquisition problems which face the Board".

The reasons for the bulletin's pessimism are apparently two-fold. One real problem lies in reconciling the vested interests of the more powerful of the public and private bodies who operate in the Highlands. Secondly, there is the virtual impossibility of securing the necessary Parliamentary time to enact legislation. However, the Board is to be congratulated on putting forward such sensible proposals. It should not be too modest in pressing for their implementation.

The question of land use in the Highlands is closely related to the question of land tenure. Just as the Board is justified in attempting to carry out economic experiments with alternative forms of land use, the same reasons it would surely be justified in carrying out social experiments with alternative forms of land tenure. The ultimate purpose of the Board's existence is, after all, to maintain viable communities in the rural areas of the Highlands and Islands, and in particular, in the crofting townships.