



## [Organisation of the Scottish Crofters Union]

At first we concentrated on building up the Federation of Crofter Unions. By that time many of the C.U. branches were dormant. It was very difficult to locate the last office-bearers of the dormant branches. It was almost equally difficult to locate, and get a response from the office-bearers of the branches that were still active, but only just. Gradually we got the Federation membership up to ten Union branches. Working under the umbrella of the Federation enabled us to speak for the whole crofting community.

It will be noted that it was therefore providential that the Federation was formed in the early 1960s when the movement was more active. A Federation could not be formed in the late 1970s, which is the period I am speaking about. In the absence of a Federation, there was therefore no way the new Union could be organised.

Our plan, to begin with, was to build up the Federation by stimulating the Union branches all over the Highlands and Islands and the most active branches were the five branches in the Western Isles. Then we wanted to employ a fulltime organiser who would help to organise the various Union branches and coordinate their efforts - through the Federation - with one voice.

We would need money in order to employ a fulltime organiser for the Union throughout the seven crofting counties, and there were only two ways of raising money, either from the members or from the Highlands and Islands Development Board as an initial pump priming exercise.

Except in the Western Isles, or parts of the Western Isles, there were hardly any paid-up union members. The membership fees hitherto had only been a nominal couple of shillings per member per year. We in Lewis and Harris branch raised the membership fee to £1 but it was plainly obvious that we needed external grant if the Crofters Union movement was ever to make any progress, because the movement would never get anywhere without an organiser and we would never get an organiser unless we got financial assistance from the H.I.D.B.

Accordingly we wrote to the H.I.D.B. giving twenty reasons why they should give a starting grant to the Federation in order to employ an organiser to organise the Crofters Union movement. We suggested that it would take five years to organise the movement to the point where it would be able to carry on, on its own - and therefore we wanted financial assistance to cover a period of five years.

In the meantime it had become quite clear to us that we must work for the concept of one single Crofters Union for the whole Highlands. We also knew full well that the H.I.D.B. would in no way give money except for a movement that embraced the whole Highlands. Accordingly we put forward from the outset the concept of 'one voice' and the concept of 'the strong areas helping the weak areas'.

The H.I.D.B. did not throw us out at once and that encouraged us. An earlier approach to the H.I.D.B. some years before had met with a negative, and because of that we were not very hopeful. However, the personnel had changed and we dealt with two people whose own background was crofting. Our initial approach was to Mr Macaskill, the secretary. He passed us on to Mr Hugh Maclean, a Tìree man, and all our lengthy negotiations were with Hugh Maclean. He was a key man in the formation of the new union.

It was obvious that the Board was very sceptical. We were asked to draw up projections and estimates and answers to impossible questions and we did our best to wriggle our way through or out of every tight corner. Mr Maclean was however most helpful at all times. We had very long discussions and he summarised the points we discussed in a very helpful way.

At length the Board suggested a Feasibility Study in 1984. We felt that the Board were not at all convinced that the crofters would support the proposed Crofters Union - although we assured them that they would. We felt that the idea of a Feasibility Study was to prove for themselves that the crofters were or were not behind the scheme. We were sure that a Feasibility Study was a breakthrough despite the fact that the money the Board granted for the study was indeed very small.

Meantime we in the Federation hit upon the idea of holding the Federation AGM in Inverness on the eve of the Crofters Commission Conference where a large number of crofters from every corner of the seven crofting counties were at Inverness. The Crofters Commission cooperated with us fully and saved us a large amount of money. In fact we could not possibly have held our AGMs at Inverness without the assistance and cooperation of

the Crofters Commission. They even sent out a notice calling our meeting to all the assessors along with their own papers.

We prepared Annual Reports and the main theme of all these meetings and Annual Reports was the appointment of a fulltime organiser in order to organise the movement. I am convinced that these Inverness meetings and Annual Reports brought the scheme to the attention of many crofters everywhere and therefore the groundwork to a large extent was laid for the consultant who went round to speak with the crofters before drawing up his Feasibility Report.

Provisionally, we secured the services of the right person to carry out the Feasibility Study. The publishing of the Feasibility Study set the heather on fire. The Board was impressed, and enthusiastic. The facts were, as stated repeatedly by us, crofters everywhere welcomed the opportunity to set up a simple Crofters Union. It was as if they were waiting for the opportunity and the plan was clearly set out in detail in the Feasibility Study.

A Steering Committee was formed in order to carry out the heavy programme set out in the Feasibility Study. Requests for speakers to address meetings all over the Highlands and Islands poured in. Union branches were formed at these meetings, with a speed that surprised everybody. I think that the crofters themselves were surprised with the enthusiasm of the crofting community. There was no dissent from any crofter. Obviously the time was ripe. The groundwork was done. Everybody was happy including the H.I.D.B.

It only remained now for the Steering Committee to set to work in order to carry out the plan laid out in the Hunter report. Again the Board kindly agreed to retain the services of Dr Jim Hunter, our consultant, and I should not forget to say that Mr Hugh Maclean of the Board as well as John Angus Mackay of the Stornoway office of the Board and two members from the Federation served on a sub-committee for the previous year.

Preparing for the Feasibility Study involved:

- A. Drawing up terms of reference.
- B. Searching for and interviewing candidates to carry out the Feasibility Study etc.

Then Mr Hugh Maclean agreed to join us as an adviser and observer on the 'Steering Committee'.

The Steering Committee worked like mad for a whole year, meeting in Inverness every four months to discuss an agenda of over twenty items at each meeting, and at the same time carrying on negotiations with the Board to ensure the maximum financial support and if possible, over a five year period.

We also opened negotiations with the N.F.U. with whom we were in touch over the previous several years. It was becoming clear that insurance services were a big problem. Seemingly the N.F.U. was surprised and even taken aback by our success and they were not very happy that we set up a branch in Tiree. Seemingly they felt that Tiree was an exclusive province of the N.F.U. However, it was the Tiree crofters that formed a branch of the Crofters Union on their own initiative. Like other places, they asked us for a speaker to explain the plan.

The Feasibility Study envisaged a five-year period to set up branches of the Union. In fact we carried out all that work in one year and the Steering Committee was ready with over fifty branches when it was time to launch the new Union as previously agreed, at the end of 1985 (in November 1985 at the time of the Assessors Conference).

[ends]

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Author: Angus Macleod

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