

THE SCOTTISH CROFTERS UNION

The new Scottish Crofters Union is one of the most spectacular Highland success stories of recent times. In this article, Dr James Hunter, the SCU's director, charts the growth of the organisation and outlines its aims and objectives.

With over 50 branches and with over 3000 members, the Scottish Crofters Union (SCU) is by far the biggest crofting organisation any of us has ever seen. The SCU has its own headquarters and its own staff. And now that the union is fully operational, it has the capacity and resources to put the crofting case strongly and effectively to government ministers and official agencies in charge of crofting policy. The SCU's emergence, then, is the most important development in crofting affairs for very many years.

Locally-based crofters unions have long been a feature of the crofting scene. And in the early 1960's, in particular, these unions were both active and well-supported. In the late 1960's and 1970's, however, something of a decline began; not least because of the inability of small, under-financed and purely voluntary organisations to make much of an impact on distant politicians and administrators.

Some central direction was given to these local groups by the Federation of Crofters Unions. And in the early 1980's, the Federation, under the guidance of their chairman, Mr Angus MacLeod, Marybank, Stornoway, concluded that the time had come to embark on a major measure of reform.

The crofters union movement, the Federation decided, should be made more professional. A full-time organiser should be appointed. And there should be much more co-operation and co-ordination between different localities.

In November of 1983, the Federation asked the Highland Board to finance an independent report on these proposals — one of the reporters' functions being to assess the degree of support for them among crofters themselves. The Board agreed. And in August 1984, I was commissioned to carry out the resulting feasibility study.

The report which I presented to the Federation established that the previous decline in the crofters union membership had already been reversed. Numbers were growing steadily and there was clearly a good deal of backing for the concept of a revamped and more effective organisation. The report accordingly recommended that the old-style local unions be replaced by a single Crofters Union covering all the crofting areas and having at least one full-time official. The report also recommended that the Federation appoint a steering group to put these suggestions into effect.

At their annual general meeting in Inverness in November, 1984, the Federation accepted these proposals and the Crofters Union Steering Group, chaired

by Angus MacLeod and including representatives of all the main crofting areas, was duly constituted in January 1985. Having first raised some £15,000 to finance its own activities, the Steering Group promptly set about the task of creating the first Highland-wide crofting organisation since the Highland Land league of a century ago.

That was a massive undertaking. In Lewis and Harris, for example, the former Lewis and Harris Crofters Union, with its single ruling committee, was replaced by no fewer than fourteen branches of the new Crofters Union. In Shetland, seven branches were formed. Another seven appeared in Skye and Lochalsh and several more in the Uists.

Most surprising to all involved in the new movement was its rapid progress in places where there was no tradition of crofters union activity. The union branch established in Tisee at the beginning of April 1985, for example, quickly attracted 90 members. And there were similar developments on the Highland mainland where total union membership rose from under 100 to over 600 in the first nine months of 1985. By the autumn, a continuous chain of union branches stretched all along the north coast of Sutherland and all the way down the west coast of the mainland from Cape Wrath to Ardnamurchan. At the same time, a number of branches were formed in Caithness, East Sutherland and Easter Ross.

In addition to supervising these activities, Angus MacLeod and his Steering Group had to begin establishing the Union's central organisation. A constitution was drafted, circulated and finalised. Local branches began to be supplied with regular newsletters and other material. Above all, the finances of the new organisation were put in order.

The draft annual budget drawn up by the Steering Group envisaged a total annual expenditure — on everything from the union's central headquarters to the smallest branch — of some £70,000. Armed with these figures, the Steering Group approached the HIDB and asked for start-up aid of the type which the Board have provided for other organisations.

In May the Highland Board agreed to meet half the union's projected costs in 1986 and 1987; to meet one quarter of these costs in 1988; and to meet one fifth of these costs in 1989. In announcing that decision, the Board made clear that their attitude had been influenced very greatly by the considerable success already achieved by the Steering Group and by the demonstrable fact that crofters were already rallying behind the new union.

In the course of the summer, the Steering Group acquired headquarters premises in Broadford, Skye. They also advertised for a full-time organiser or director. And in the event, I was appointed to that post.

In September, the Steering Group published the first issue of a new Crofters Union newspaper, *The Crofter*, its title derived from a Highland League publication of the 1880's. And among the items in that first issue were advance details of the Crofters Union's inaugural conference which took place in Inverness on November 6th, 1985.

The conference adopted the union's constitution and decided that the new organisation should be officially known as *Aonadh nan Croitearan* or the

Scottish Crofters Union. The conference also formally installed the SCU's 14-strong ruling council. The council consists of all the Union's area presidents; from Shetland, Lewis and Harris, Uist and Barra, Caithness, North West Sutherland, East Sutherland, Wester Ross, Skye and Lochalsh, Lochaber, Argyll. In terms of the Union's constitution, our two Western Isles Areas — Uist and Barra, Lewis and Harris — are also entitled to additional representation in recognition of their especially high memberships.

Frank Rennie from Ness in Lewis was elected SCU President. Ronnie Campbell from Bohuntin, Roy Bridge, became Vice-President and Angus McFlattie from Waterloo, Skye was appointed Honorary Treasurer. In recognition of his crucial contribution to the development of the new organisation, Angus MacLeod was unanimously elected the SCU's first and — so far — only Honorary President.

At the conference, the Steering Group was able to report that the number of SCU branches had passed the 50 mark — with these branches stretching from Unst in the north to Islay in the south. And at that point, it was further reported, total paid-up membership of the organisation stood at 3148 — a figure which the original feasibility study had not expected to be reached until 1988.

In December the SCU appointed their headquarters secretary and administrator, Mrs Fiona Mandeville from Skye. And on January 20 1986, Mrs Mandeville and myself began work in the SCU's office in Broadford.

During 1985, the Steering Group were obliged to concentrate on organisational questions and, as a result, took few policy initiatives. The SCU consequently began by getting to grips with the issues confronting crofters. And in the first few weeks of 1986 the SCU made a series of important announcements on policy matters.

The union prepared a detailed submission on the need for a concerted follow-on to the EEC-supported Integrated Development Programme (IDP) in the Western Isles. The SCU also made known their views on the projected Agricultural Programme (ADP) in the other Scottish Islands. We insisted that our representatives should be involved in the planning and organisation of the ADP. We stressed that there should be an upper limit on the size of agricultural enterprise to be assisted under ADP — in order to ensure that the bulk of the available funds are directed towards those most in need of such assistance. And on the basis of our experience of IDP in the Western Isles, we made various recommendations as to how the ADP should be organised to avoid some of the snags which have arisen under IDP.

The SCU also took immediate steps to safeguard the long-term future of sheep producers in the Highlands and Islands, because sheepmeat is one of the few agricultural commodities not in surplus in the EEC, sheep producers have not so far experienced the difficulties encountered in dairying, beef and — increasingly — in cereals. That has been of considerable benefit to crofters who depend heavily on sheep.

But we believe that this happy state of affairs will not last indefinitely. As people in other parts of the EEC move out of other commodities, they may well move into sheep. Such a switch would soon eliminate the gap — current-

ly about 20% of the total EEC requirements — between sheepmeat demand and supply in the Common Market. When that happens, EEC support mechanisms for sheep will be subject to the same political and financial pressures we have already seen in other sectors. Returns to producers would then fall. And though low ground farmers moving into sheep in such circumstances might still make money, our people would not. The overall consequences for sheepmen in the Highlands and Islands would be potentially disastrous — especially as there is no obvious alternative to which they could turn.

As a result, the SCU are requesting their branches to consider the case for quotas on sheep production. We wish to prevent yet another Common Market "Mountain". And we also aim to safeguard the interests of hill sheep producers — as against the interests of those low ground agriculturalists who might wish to move into sheep solely in response to problems in other sectors.

In order to further enhance prospects for sheep producers in northern Scotland, the SCU have asked the Highland Board to undertake a major marketing initiative designed to stress the fact that lamb and mutton from the Highlands and Islands is derived from animals still reared by traditional methods on natural pastures — and consequently free from the chemical and other additives now regarded with growing suspicion by consumers.

In addition to advancing the general crofting interest in this way, the SCU propose to offer a range of services to their members. The SCU will be making a comprehensive insurance scheme available to individual members of the Union. And the SCU will also be offering a free legal advisory service on matters relating to crofting law.

Despite the importance which we attach to having a full-time staff and to campaigning nationally on behalf of crofting, the SCU will continue to rely heavily on voluntary effort at the local level. Our branches, we hope, will meet regularly, take up local issues on their own account and generally become the major focus for development in crofting communities.

We are also establishing an associate membership to enable people and organisations who are not directly involved in crofting to give their moral and financial support to an organisation which we believe is vital to the future wellbeing of the Highlands and Islands. Should you wish to become an associate member, we should be very pleased to hear from you. The annual subscription rates are as follows: private companies and public bodies, £40; voluntary organisations, £25; individuals, £20.

The SCU have already achieved a good deal and won the backing of crofters everywhere. With your support we shall achieve a lot more.