



## The Congested District Board (1897)

The Government decided to establish a new development board and in 1897 the 'Congested District Board' was created. The Board consisted of five ex-officio members; both the Secretary and the Under-Secretary of State for Scotland, and the Chairmen of the Fishery Board, the local Government and the Crofters Commission, as well as not more than three members nominated by the Scottish Secretary. The Board only had a normal income of £35,000 per annum.

The Board had power to assist the crofting population in various specified respects, such assistance being given either by way of gift, loan or sale at cost price, under whatever conditions the Board might find it necessary to impose. They had power to acquire land by purchase or gift, and dispose of it by subdividing among the cottars and crofters for the purpose of cultivation and grazing. They were also empowered to assist the crofter population by the provision of piers, boat slips and harbours and provide aid for the development of the fishing industry, improve and develop agriculture and stock, assist home industries, technical training, roads, water supply and drainage etc. The main idea, however, was to purchase land and relieve congestion.

The Board was given a formidable task, but hardly any money with which to carry out their various powers. As might be expected they faced severe difficulties as a result of their limited budget, and that was exacerbated by their lack of power to borrow money, all of which restricted their ability to purchase and develop land.

The Board also discovered that crofters preferred to remain tenants and not become landowners by purchasing their holdings. Crofters were also afraid of becoming liable for ownership rates, and in certain circumstances they were afraid they might not be able to sell their landholdings if the circumstances changed. There was a severe lack of capital among the crofter class.

Long after that the crofters of Lewis refused Lord Leverhulme's generous gift of their land for free, because they calculated that the income of the Lewis Estate did not match the necessary expenditure. There is also the case of the Owner/Occupier Act 1976, which enables crofters to acquire their own croft land for a modest outlay, yet there is no rush to purchase because the majority of crofters conclude that the 1976 Act is contrary to the spirit and concept of crofting.

The Congested District Board was under the impression that they could only sell land, and not lease it, and it was 1908 before the law officers of the Crown advised them that it was competent for them to lease land. By then the Smallholders (Scotland) Bill was introduced in Parliament in 1906, and as that Bill provided for the dissolution of the Congested District Board, it was naturally restricted from carrying out its work after that. The Smallholders Bill was often defeated, but was continually being re-introduced, until it eventually passed in 1911, when the Congested District Board were transferred to the new Board of Agriculture for Scotland and the powers of the Crofters Commission were transferred to the new Land Court, created by the Smallholders (Scotland) Act 1911.

The Congested District Board, which was only in existence for 14 years, provided money for footpaths in Park, as well as valuable assistance for various other things including the Harris Tweed industry. Large boilers were distributed for the dyeing of wool, and some of them are still in Lochs. The Board also advanced money to crofters for the purchase of an advanced wooden loom (beart mhor). They also paid the salary of a textile instructor, Mr Alexander Lamont, who gave valuable practical instruction to crofters as to how to improve wool dyeing, warping and weaving etc. He was stationed in Balallan for a while.

The Board claimed they helped to create 640 new land holdings, but none of these were in Park, Lochs. They did provide hand winches with which to haul boats up on the beach. The remains of the Calbost winch may still be seen on the beach. Money was provided for village wells and the Calbost well may still be seen there. Bulls were also provided, and they were referred to as 'congested bulls' (tarbh a congestic), which was a Highland beast with two large horns like a bicycle handlebars. In our youth we equated the Highland breed of cattle with the word 'congestick'.

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