

I'm going to talk in this column about Brexit – no, please don't stop reading straight away. This is rightly a major concern to crofters and hill farmers in Sutherland as it could affect the very existence of agriculture in the Highlands & Islands. Two recent authoritative reports highlight this (both worth reading when we do get a rainy day).

The Scottish Government appointed Agricultural Champions report "A Future Strategy for Scottish Agriculture" covers the whole of Scottish agriculture but does discuss our sort of farming in some detail, mainly in response to SCF comments on the previous version. For example it says "that Scotland has huge areas of less favoured permanent grassland and rough grazing, where high nature value farming is both traditional and common." And that "Future policies must address the specific needs of this type of farming, including the fact that low profitability threatens its very survival." Yes indeed!

They also say "one size does not fit all" – something SCF has been saying for years as agriculture in Aberdeenshire or the Lothians is very different and too often crofting in general and common grazings in particular have been a late afterthought and the schemes don't really work for us. We do need to get common grazings back into use as they are underused and undervalued: properly tailored support schemes can make them work again.

The Champions also endorse the capping of payments so that there is an upper limit on what farms receive with the extra being redistributed. This should mean that even within a falling overall total, small and medium size enterprises continue to get the same level of support.

All of which is very encouraging.

But I am not sure about their emphasis on change of mindset. They say "We recommend that a top priority starting immediately is mindset change, to help farmers and crofters to become more progressive, entrepreneurial and resilient" Are they saying crofters aren't trying to make a profit? What alternatives do most of us have to raising store sheep and cattle? Do we want amalgamation of crofts to provide bigger more profitable units which will mean loss of population and diversity?

The second recent report that I would commend to you is the Highlands & Islands Agricultural Support Group on "Post-Brexit Implications for Agriculture, Crofting And Related land Use in the Highlands & Islands" by Steven Thomson and Andrew Moxey. It states specifically that "due to the bio-physical constraints ... low intensity production is the norm". So there is not much else we can do but raise store cattle and sheep. And they go on to say that LFA Cattle and Sheep will be hardest hit under all the Brexit scenarios they consider. They do, however, make the case for "public funding for public goods" that is payment to crofters and farmers for things such as landscape, biodiversity etc that are not valued by the market but which do have economic value.

David Mundell (Secretary of State for Scotland) at a recent meeting stated that things will all work out – agriculture won't be traded away, standards won't be compromised and that trade deals will be done – but I am not sure those of us round the table were convinced.

So the evidence for the need for support for crofters and hill farmers is there – but is anyone listening?