

Fisherfolk and the sharing of the rent of the sea

Peter Gibb on the land reform agenda below high tide



THERE ARE MOVES to bring control of Scottish fisheries into community control. Two questions are raised by this: who is the community; and what exactly is meant by “control”.

Two hundred miles north of Edinburgh – Scotland’s capital city and the venue for July’s 23rd biennial Conference of the International Union for Land Value Taxation – lies the Royal Burgh of Cullen, with a falling population something under a thousand. The town sits on the relatively balmy south coast of the Moray Firth. At a latitude of 57 degrees north of the equator, figs ripen on the vine in the local hotelier’s garden, warmed, amazingly, by the dying licks of the gulf stream.

Cullen is the seat of one of Scotland’s greatest private landlords, the Earl of Seafield. If not idyllic, Cullen has been a pleasant home to generations. The proto-Georgist Professor William Ogilvie, born 16 miles west at Pittensair outside Lhanbryde, was master of Cullen Grammar School in 1759 for a year. And for five years now, a farm a mile outside of town has been the base of Land Reform Scotland.

The people of this area are close to the pulse of what is happening in the seas around these islands.

A hundred years ago, Cullen was in the midst of a herring bonanza. The Moray Firth was the scene for an economic miracle, a bed for technical progress, and a generator of unparalleled regional social change in modern times. The Scottish novelist Neil Gunn, in *The Silver Darlings*, tells the story of those heady times. The fishing gave Moray its industrial revolution; and, perhaps unusually, the fish was largely a popular revolution.

Most Seatown families owned a sail boat. With the men home for the weekend, Cullen harbour – like those of neighbouring Portnockie

and Findochty, and many others further afield – could be crossed, quay to quay, over the water, by stepping from deck to deck of the closely moored fishing boats completely filling the harbour – jammed together, like sardines in a tin. The coastal towns of the Moray coast were built on the wealth from the sea. But it did not last.

CULLEN’S fall from common wealth is there to be read, in a series of sepia photographs ranged above the public bar of The Three Kings Inn.

The Inn, named after an local battle, a long time ago, in which a Scottish, a Norwegian and a Danish king lost their lives – another fight for control of land and resources – sits on the town’s North Castle Street. The street slopes steeply down to the holiday houses of the Seatown, the foreshore unused but by the dogwalkers and sand castle builders, and the all but empty harbour.

The photographs in the bar show a different scene – the boats, the people, activity – from a different age. One based on a fish that’s long since gone, swum away or barrelled, leaving the aging fisherfolk to their fate.

And as this happened, sail gave way to steam, gave way to diesel. The boats went further out, to catch up with the fleeing fish. The capital needed for going to sea increased: many fold so. The ability to make a living from the fish decreased. Fishing became available to fewer and fewer, and wealthier and wealthier folk at that.

Monopoly of the sea, by a few hundred massive floating factories, is the fact of the matter today. And with each passing day, it seems there is less and less fish for them to catch.

Natural systems live dynamically. Ecosystems grow and die, trans-

form and heal. But our management of the ways in which we take from these gifts of nature have not been dynamic. They have not allowed for healing. They have sought simply to maximise the "harvest", at all costs. Cullen's cost has been the story of its fall. The harvest maximised has favoured the few, at the expense of the many.

The few were our grandparents – a generation or two; the many will keep on coming, our children for whom the herring would seem to have gone. The labour spent was their own, our grandparents' to give, and its returns justly theirs. The capital, while accumulated in an economic age of less enlightenment than ours, still justly saved, and theirs.

But the fish – mother nature's gift: what right had anyone to take that from their grandchildren and our own? This is the essence of the issues underlying the concepts of sustainability. How do we manage natural resources in such a way as not to compromise the rights – equal to others – of the coming generations, in perpetuity?

THE PURPOSE of land reform is to put right, by the requirements of natural law, the balance of our individual, common and collective rights, obligations, and duties pertaining to the natural resources of the world. Land reform – perverse though it might seem to some – therefore includes "sea reform". Much of the history of the world through the modern age has been based on the appropriation of the land – our common inheritance and birthright – to private interest.

But in more recent times, the value of the sea has been subjected to a similar process. The marine resource has seen "enclosure", and it now benefits an ever-narrower private interest. The control of the sea's resources has fallen ever further from the communities local to them: the return on the fruit of the sea have fallen into ever-larger pockets than those of the common folk. Rights to fish are freely bought and sold at market to private gain without regard for the ethics of ownership. And to compound such problems, the private use of areas of seabed, for fish farming and the like, are being found to compromise the health and value of that portion of the common resource still remaining in relatively wider hands.

David Thomson reviews the current state of the world's oceans (*see page 4*). He catalogues the main issues and problems regarding our present and recent use of the sea's living resource. He concurs with most other commentators on the matter, in identifying, immediately before us, an ecological, economic and social crisis. The fishermen's fish have not come home to spawn.

We should ask how the fishermen have allowed this to happen. How could they have been so blasé about their own future? In living memory, the fishermen have called for rights to intensify their activities, to increase their catches. Yet it seemed clear to many of those outside the industry, that this strategy was short-sighted and doomed. Why did the fishermen not see this too? Why have the fishermen in Europe only recently started calling for the introduction of measures that would allow them to lessen their impact on the seas that are their livelihood?

The answer lies in the control of the resource: without responsibility for management, and the return of the resource lease values, directly to those communities reliant on that resource, the interests lying behind all decisions and actions were likely to be inherently flawed.

There are current moves, within Scotland and elsewhere, to wrest control of at least the inshore fisheries management from the State, and return it to local community control. However, it seems that the control that is being sought is simply management control – the control of licences, quotas, season management and other such instruments. However, for moves to return control to succeed, the changes must go further, and deeper.

Licences must be area and ground-specific, and time limited. The explicit control and prescription of catch species is impracticable.

Species target-catching must take the place of such existing policies: licences must be annual only, or otherwise time-limited. The granting of licence must be the lending of a right to the use of a specific resource for a specific time. Licences and quotas must not be permanent. They must not be tradable as they are at present.

The ability to effectively and dynamically control, on an ongoing basis, the use of the resource upon which they survive, must be returned to local communities. And the value of that natural resource untapped, must be returned to those same communities, with rents used for local public purposes.

SUCH POLICIES, which flow from the insights of thinkers like Henry George, are beginning to be applied in modern political and socio-economic policy thinking relating to our use of the sea. Resource licensing and renting offers the only sustainable future for the fishing industry.

Control of local fisheries must indeed be vested in the local communities who rely on them for their livelihood. Management must be guided by the advice and regulation of higher government, such as the scientific, economic and technical advice of Scottish Natural Heritage and the relevant Scottish Executive departments. In terms of macro-economic policy, ecological well-being, wider national social policy, and so on, the hand of national government must bear on local fishing policy.

But it is those individuals and groups, whose lives are most directly and closely dependent on nature's resources, that must have directing control of them, and so of their own futures.

Responsibility for our future, properly informed and enlightened, indeed rests at home.

Above all, the value which is created, not by any one fisherman or group, but by the benevolence of nature, and the economic and dietary need of the community, must be caught by that community, and reserved for its social needs. It cannot, if our fisheries are to have a sustainable future, be allowed to remain privatised. The rental values of our living marine resources must not be left in those private hands who have, over the years, accumulated quota, increased their licence, speculated on the increasing value of what they were foolishly and wrongly "given" in the first place.

Licence to fish for a living is, in a developed society and economy, a privilege and not a right. The wielding of that privilege has a very real cost to the rest of society: for one skipper to go to sea in an industrial boat, others must tie up. For one boat to land a hold of cod at market, another boat with its crew cannot, and other employment must be found. We must ask: what price monopoly access to the sea? Local control must not mean merely management control of fisheries: it must include control of the rental income stream that flows from the naturally abundant resource that is the seven seas of the world.

After all, who is the sea for, if not for the people?

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Loo With A View

A PUBLIC lavatory is on sale in London with a price tag of £60,000. Beside the river Thames in Putney, the loo became one of the most sought after properties as soon as it was advertised in March.

The 35 sq. metre former gentlemen's convenience is a hole built at the turn of the century which has permission for change of use. Plans have included turning it into an office, a recording studio and even a café.

Much of the hole in the ground is beneath the street, and the walls inside are damp – which is not surprising, since it is 10 feet from the Thames. The area is known for its flooding, but that has not deterred property speculators who think that there may be money to be made out of a loo with a view of running water.

California Beach

AS THE stock markets of America crashed during the Spring, a two-acre plot of land on the California coast was put on sale at \$40 million (£28 million).

This was the most expensive tract in the US. Its value stemmed from the fact that it was the last piece of residential land available on the 80-mile stretch of coast between Malibu and Laguna Beach.

Estate agents Coldwell Banker said the site was "the largest, most spectacular ocean front private beach building site ever offered".

Located at Irvine Cove, south of Los Angeles, the asking price was £316 a square foot – seven times more than the sites of the Hollywood stars in Beverly Hills.