**1977: Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB) launches community co-op scheme**

***Intro (Gill Murray):*** *This is an extract from an interview I recorded with Brian Wilson over Microsoft Teams in September 2021. I wanted to talk to Brian because his name had repeatedly come up in other interviews when we discussed the origins of the HIDB Community Co-op Scheme that was launched in 1977. In the mid-1970s Brian was a journalist working at the West Highland Free Press. His visits to a comparable community co-op initiative in the Irish Gaeltacht, connections he made with people working there, and the articles he subsequently published were influential in raising awareness of the concept of community co-ops in Scotland. Here he tells the story in his own words, recounting the origins and the legacy of community co-ops in the Highlands and Islands.*

**Gill: So Brian, what first brought to your attention the community coop scheme and the Irish Gaeltacht and why were you inspired to write about it and think it would work in Scotland?**

**Brian Wilson:** Well, I think it's always important to recognise what had been done before. So there had always been a strain within the HIDB which advocated a more community-led approach to development, a different concept of development. In particular, there was a very good guy, Bob Storey, who was at the HIDB from its earliest days. There have been people arguing internally for years, that instead of being the conventional grant and loan to private developers, that there should be a different concept of development. So that's an important factor because nobody ever does things on their own, there's always history to these things.

It's quite funny because I can almost visualise it but someone left a little -you'd almost have mistaken it for a religious tract- a little booklet about Glencolumbkille in the West Highland Free Press office. I've often wondered who it was and it lay there for long enough. I always remember it had a little quote on the front which was, "Better to light one candle than forever curse the darkness." Which actually turned out to be -I don't think it was original- it had been used by the guy behind Glencolumbkille. So eventually, I don't remember the exact trigger, but eventually, I became sufficiently interested in that concept to go and see what was going on there.

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Anyway the upshot of that was that I wrote about them and I asked Father McDyer and Tom O'Donnell if they would come across to the Hebrides, to talk about the concept of community coops and they said they would be delighted to. Obviously there had been coops in the Hebrides and in the Highland and Islands before but they tended to be - I think it would all have been single function coops and what was quite intriguing and different about this was the multifunction. The idea that there wasn't just one thing but it was across a number of activities in each case and they were different activities, whatever suited the needs of the area. That seemed to me to be a very appropriate form of development for the West Highlands and Islands. As it turned out, I think it was exclusively the islands.

Anyway, so I don't know what year we're in - '76, '77, something like that and then one day the Chairman of the Highlands and Islands Development Board at that time was a guy, Ken Alexander, he was a good guy. Ken was a Labour guy, he was an economist, a very highly respected guy. I bumped into Ken at Edinburgh airport and he said that he'd been reading this stuff I'd been writing about the community coops. I think it would be fair to say that Ken was looking to put a different kind of stamp on the HIDB at that time. So I said, "If those guys were willing to come across…" He said, "Well we could take that on and bring them over." That suited us both very well because I didn't have the wherewithal to really take it forward. The only way it could have been taken forward was through the HIDB, so that was what happened was that Tom O'Donnell and Father McDyer came across and they did public meetings in, I think in Stornoway and Castlebay in Barra and created a lot of interest.

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I think it did introduce a new awareness of self-help and enablement in places which hadn't had much opportunity to do that. From the HIDB point of view, they supported them but they never … It was still in the fringes of their business model and I suppose by 1979 it would have been difficult for it to be … It wasn't the best time to be saying you're suddenly going to adopt a kind of a cooperative, community-based model. But fair enough, within its own limitations they did okay and as I say, there's legacies. I think if you fast-forward it, what it undoubtedly did was, it laid the ground for community landownership and in a number of cases, the same people would have been involved and would have seen when community landownership became an option that they would have seen that pretty much as an extension of what they'd been working in for years or decades before that so I think again there is a continuum. It gave people the confidence to do these things, it provided at least the basis of a framework to do them within and in that respect also the legacy does live on.