**1983: Neutralising of HIDB Community Co-op Scheme**

***Intro (Gill Murray):*** *This clip is an extract from an oral history recoding made in October 2020 with Iain Clark, John Watt, Chas Ball and Tor Justad discussing the neutralising of the HIDB community co-op scheme. After the HIDB withdrew direct funding in 1983, ACE Hi (initially funded by the HIDB) supported the development of community enterprise in the Highlands and Islands. This good-humoured exchange reflects the differing views and on why the HIDB decided to withdraw direct funding. The final comments reflect the complexity of the HIDB as an organisation, with different teams advocating for very different visions of economic development. The ‘event in Westminster’ referred to in this discussion, was the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979.*

*You hear first from* ***Iain Clark****: Iain worked as a youth community development worker in London, before moving to the Highlands in 1981 and establishing the Fyrish Trust in 1982. Iain became the first development worker employed at ACE HI in 1985.*

*The other voices you’ll hear in this clip are John Watt and Chas Ball:*

***John Watt****: Was an HIDB community co-op field officer for the Highland mainland and Argyll, in the late 1970s. Continuing to work at HIDB through the transition to HIE in 1991, he held various posts including Senior Economist, Head of the Community Land Unit, and finally as Director of Strengthening Communities.*

***Chas Ball****: Chas had a background in social development and was employed as a community co-op field officer in 1979, firstly covering the Highland Mainland and the Northern Isles, and dedicated to the Norther Isles from 1981. He left the HIDB in 1983 to take up a post with Leeds City Council as a Co-operative Development Officer supporting co-operatives and community enterprises in the local authority area.*

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**Iain Clark:** We [ACE-HI] had a small office above the employment office, the employment agency, and then we moved from there through to Invergordon when we expanded and took on area officers to work for ACE-HI; so we had one again in Shetland, one in Orkney, and over in the Western Isles as well as on the mainland and down in Argyll. So again, I would need my booklet here to remind me how many we actually had in the end, but it was clear that we needed people actually out in the different areas and regions to be able to provide support for in some cases four or five or six community cooperatives that were actually running in that area, so it was pretty well a full-time job for the area officers.

**John Watt:** So in a sense, Gillian, you and I had this conversation last week, this concept within HIDB of ‘promote and float’, you know; work up an idea, work up a programme, get people involved and then float it off to an arm’s-length organisation -which paralleled what we did in the Gaelic sector with Comunn na Gaidhlig, and in the arts sector with Hi-Arts- and in some ways ACEHI replaced the community co-op field officers with their own staff doing very similar types of work but working for an arm’s-length agency rather than directly for the government agency -and that was a kind of conscious policy, if you like. It had challenges, as we’ll probably find out later on, but that was the concept. In that respect, in some ways we actually reversed the loss of direct contact, if you like, with these, and replaced it with specialist support delivered in a different way.

**Chas Ball:** Yes, but, John, that doesn’t figure in the way the history’s been written. There is merit in there and there is logic in what you say but for an organisation that got an enormous amount of good publicity about community co-ops up to the point, that it was decided to severely limit the whole idea of community economic development -you have to question what motivated McAskill and the various other senior managers and the board members to make such a move without a really effective solution. People have speculated that it was something to do with the nature of the relationship with Westminster Government, you know, about that co-ops weren’t the flavour of the month, you know? We don’t know what motivated them to change but underlying it was clearly the idea that there were too many people on short-term contracts and therefore the headcount…you know, the civil servants who were looking at this didn’t like the headcount. So I do think it’s interesting, I do think what you’re saying is logical, but it wasn’t necessarily an explicit strategy.

**John Watt:** So you’re saying I’m indulging in post-factual rationalisation here?

**Chas Ball:** Yes, a little, just a little.

**John Watt:** Well, that might be the case, but I think Roy and I in the centre, and Bob Storey as well of course, we basically felt that this was important enough to try and find an alternative way and whether it was a strategy or whether it was a: ‘let’s see how we could do this’ -we sort of got there eventually.

**Chas Ball:** You got there, yes, absolutely.