

*EDITORIAL*

## A Blessing in Disguise

It has been said, with more than a grain of truth, that Ireland is the most socialist country in Western Europe — from a forestry standpoint. There are very cogent historical reasons for this situation and it is not the intention of the State to maintain this position. Over the past four years Regulation (EEC) No. 1820/80, otherwise known as the Western Package, has attempted to redress the imbalance with only limited success. With hindsight we now know that the antipathy towards trees and the sociological constraints are more deep-rooted than we had anticipated.

The 'Package' is due to be reviewed this year, so it is opportune to suggest that the review should look forward as well as backward. It is not enough to say that some IR£19 million have been made available for private commercial tree planting and that the area planted by an applicant in any one planting season must not be less than 0.25 ha. Private woodland ownership in Europe is already fragmented. There are some 3 million woodland owners in the EEC and all but 50,000 have holdings of doubtful viability. The general standard of management is poor and the difficulties inherent in managing small units are aggravated by lack of knowledge and absence of management incentives. Fortunately for them the vast majority of such owners are not dependent on their woodland for a livelihood.

Is it the intention in Ireland, under the aegis of the Western Package, to swap an agricultural 'poverty trap' for its forestry counterpart? If the answer is in the negative, then it behoves us to take preventative action. We must spell out the objectives as we see them in terms of ownership, viable unit size and forest structure. Measures must be implemented to ensure that the policy adopted will generate the kind of stands and forest that will enrich the 'West' and the Nation. The poor response to date for the 'Western Package' may yet turn out to be a blessing in disguise.