

TRANSCRIPT

First Minister, Alex Salmond – Keynote address at the Community Land Scotland Annual Conference 2013

Friday 7th June 2013

Feasgar math agus failte.

Ladies and gentlemen it's taken six years, a constant effort from the principal of this college, assisted by Donnie Munro to get my pronunciation to that level. It's a tribute, not to me, but to their expertise. I have to say, delighted though I am, honoured though I am, to be addressing this Community Land Scotland conference, we're speaking here at Sabhal Mòr on its fortieth anniversary year, I did have a moment's hesitation the other day when I found out I was to be introduced by David Cameron. And then I thought to myself – the revolution of land ownership in Scotland has reached the unexpected parts of the political spectrum. But then of course, as David said he may be slightly older but certainly a lot wiser than his namesake so I am delighted to be here.

When Sabhal Mòr Ostaig was being established forty years ago, Sorley Maclean, who was a member of the first board, set out his hopes for the college in the poem "A Waxing Moon Above Sleat". He contrasts the castle's bear cairn and the weak dead ramparts with the herbs and flowers of aspirations about the sunbeam of the Gael's hope, about its old and new walls, may good fortune and success be with the great work. And so the great work of this college has met with fortune and success over these last four decades. This is one of Scotland's most inspiring institutions, it's an integral part of course of the University of the Highlands and Islands - in itself a remarkable and great achievement. It contributes to the preservation of the renewal of Gaelic, it has made the Sleat peninsula more prosperous, more populated and more successful. Immediately after I speak at the conference today, I'm going to cut the first turf of the phase of the Kilbeag Village Development Project. That project will ultimately create the first new village to be built in Skye for more than one hundred years. It is the clearest possible evidence of the potential, over time, for the repopulation and renewal of rural Scotland.

Now, it's worth remembering in 1973, the Sabhal Mòr, the great barn, was a semi derelict set of farm steadings. The steadings belonged to one of the farms established during the 19th century which had taken the place of communities which had emptied during the course of the clearances. And family after family would have past these steadings heading for ships to take them to a new life overseas, and the contrast with the current vibrancy of Sleat demonstrated by that new village would have seemed almost inconceivable at that time. It would have seemed equally unlikely in 1883 that the pier in the north west of Skye, where the Royal Navy landed to rest the Glendale crofters, who had protested of course on the restoration of grazing rights, would one day be owned as a community asset, but following Wednesday's very welcome sale of the pier, for a pound, by Highland Council to Glendale Community Trust that is exactly the current position. So this is a fitting venue and a very fitting time for a conference of Community Land Scotland, an organisation of course dedicated to enabling communities to empower themselves, to prosper, and to learn from each other's successes. The communities represented here now own around half a million acres of land in Scotland. That is a magnificent achievement on the part of each and every organisation here represented. That in itself is a change in the land ownership pattern, but of course the

accomplishment goes a great deal deeper than that. Communities like Knoydart have shown that depopulation can be reversed, businesses created, homes built in localities where these things for far too long were believed to be simply impossible. The organisations represented here demonstrated that wind power and other resources can be harnessed for local purposes. You have proven that previously loss making estates can actually be run at a profit, and not just a profit, but a community profit. You have shown by embarking on projects such as the woodland restoration that communities are just as capable as any outside body, indeed more capable, of sustaining and enhancing the environment. A lot of that can't be readily measured, but some of it can; the 160 kilowatt output of Eigg's unique island grid, 2.5 million of revenue expected from the Loch Carnan wind farm in South Uist, the homes built and refurbished in Gigha, the 50% increase in population there, in Gigha. But underpinning all of these developments is something more intangible, and that is the boost to collective self confidence that communities derive from getting ownership of their own land and taking charge of their own destiny.

Today I was over opening the new marine harvest salmon hatchery and I met Lady Ross of Marnock, the widow of the late Willie Ross, secretary of state of Scotland in the 1960s and he was secretary of state, he first moved in to Bute House and a very formidable secretary of state he was. In Bute House drawing room, I've got a portrait of another secretary of state, and that is Tom Johnston, who was secretary of state during the second world war. Tom Johnston is there for a number of reasons; he passed the legislation of course in 1943 which led to the establishment of the north of Scotland hydroelectric board. After the war, he effectively appointed himself the second chairman of the hydroelectric board. I'm not absolutely certain what the great newspapers of this realm would have made of the idea of a secretary of state or a First Minister effectively appointing himself but nonetheless if we judge what happens in terms of practical achievement as opposed to process then Tom Johnston's effective appointment of himself as the second chairman of the hydroelectric board was one of the most significant, lifesaving things that happened to the highlands of Scotland.

You can make the argument that Tom Johnston did more than any other individual in the twentieth century to arrest the depopulation of the highlands. In 1945 fewer than half of the homes in the highlands had access to electricity. By 1959, when he stood down as chair of the hydro board, that proportion had increased to over 90%. And nobody, when Tom Johnston took over chairmanship, least of all his immediate predecessor as chairman who was overcome by the entrenched opposition to the hydroelectric schemes - which was the reason for him stepping down - nobody believed that such a transformation would be possible over that period of time.

Tom Johnston, as a young man, was the editor of Forward, the independent Labour Party magazine, and he wrote a series of articles, which then became a best seller. It was entitled "Our Scots, Noble Families" – the title, and the book of course, was iconic. It was basically a catalogue of misdeeds. Johnston argued that the Scottish nobilities title deeds are rapine, murder, massacre or cheating. And basically Johnston went through the noble families of Scotland, almost one by one, and explained how they'd depopulated the land, expropriated the people, engaged in the clearances, and of course, because he was a formidable home ruler, sold the nation in every single year, from 1707. When he became secretary of state in the wartime, he did it on agreement with Churchill that his writ would run in Scotland. Churchill, who was by no means the greatest devolver in history kept that promise for about a week. Johnson then had to find another mechanism to come to terms with the Prime Minister. And so what he did was he said to Churchill that he would form a council of

state, and the agreement was that if Johnston got the support of the council of state, which was to be composed of every surviving former secretary of state for Scotland then Churchill would not gain say a Johnston proposal for Scotland. If on the other hand, if Johnson couldn't command the support of the council of state then he wouldn't push forward a proposal against Churchill's agreement, and that was the agreement they came to, and to be fair the Churchill, by and large, on the whole, that agreement was kept. And out of that agreement indecently came the legislation to establish the hydroelectric board and the potentiary powers that came with it in 1943. There was obviously a difficulty with that agreement, and the council of state, because if you cast your mind back to Our Noble Families, written in 1909, then it was exactly the same noble families who were the former secretary of states for Scotland who were to be on the council of state.

Now what I'm about to tell you I can absolutely verify, because it was told to be by Alastair Dunnett. Alastair was the 21 year old press secretary of Tom Johnston, later to become editor of the Scotsman newspaper, husband of Dorothy Dunnett, chairman of Thomson Oil for Roy Thomson and one of the great figures of Scottish journalism. But in 1941 Alastair was a very young press secretary for the secretary of state for Scotland. So Johnston's solution to this conundrum was simple, pragmatic. He got Alastair to buy up every extant copy of Our Noble Families. He effectively withdrew his own book, temporarily, from circulation. And Alastair told me this some fifteen years ago over lunch, and I said, well, you know, how could that work? Even in the days before the internet, I mean, surely somebody had mentioned. And Alasdair said, well, he said, many of the aristocrats are not among the greatest readers in the country. So my second question was what happened to the books? And Alastair said, well, of course Tom Johnston couldn't destroy a book, so in his home there was an entire room where if you opened the door, there was thousands of copies of Our Noble Families.

Some years later, a young man called Hamish McKinnon, asked Johnston why he'd taken the action to withdraw the book, come to terms with the council of state, get the legislation that established the hydro board. And Johnston said in return, he said times change, McKinnon, times change. What actually he'd done was to demonstrate that he was both a visionary and a radical, but he was also pragmatic; he wanted to make sure that the achievement went through.

He's in the drawing room at Bute House for a whole range of reasons. He's also in that drawing room because every time I hear, and I do hear many times, the latest protest against wind energy, I look up at the portrait of Tom Johnston and remember that anything that comes in opposition to renewable power in Scotland now is as of nothing compared to the opposition to hydro power in the late forties and fifties in Scotland. The irony of course, is that some of the greatest tourist attractions in the highlands of Scotland are exactly these great hydroelectric engagements and dams, which have become some of the features of the greatest parts of the highlands, but were absolutely necessary to achieve Johnston's vision of bringing electricity to the glens.

So what I want to focus on today is how we can actually get things done. How we achieve things, how we empower, how we regenerate communities. I want to talk about three ways of making change; legislation, which will follow in the Scottish Parliament, improvements that we can make without legislation and the additional opportunities that we can seize, in my estimation, with Scottish independence. As was said by the real David Cameron, last year I announced, in this very college, the establishment of the Land Reform Review Group - I'm delighted that Alison Elliot, the

group's chair is here with us today, I want to thank Jim Hunter and Sarah Skerratt for their significant contribution to the review group's work and also of course to welcome the appointment of Ian Cooke and John Watt on to the review group. As the minister said, in the Scottish Parliament on Wednesday, we'll shortly appoint two further members to the group, increasing its membership to five. The group's interim report published two weeks ago provides a clear basis for further analysis and consideration. It's clear, as the report itself acknowledges, that more work is required to make final proposals which pass the test of being both radical and practical. The group is establishing six work streams, establishing papers on topics such as taxation and the Crown Estate. There will also be a short life working group on the improvements that are necessary in the legislative framework of the Community Right to Buy.

I speak from, not the experience that is in this room, but from some personal experience about community right to buy; I've been personally involved in two community purchases in Aberdeenshire. One of the first ever exercising of the Community Right to Buy rights and the act in 2003 by the Boddam Development Trust, engagement which was important in demonstrating that the Ministry of Defence was covered by the legislation, was partially successful in gaining at least the playing fields that the Development Trust were after, but not successful in terms of gaining the whole ambition of the project, which was to have the whole of the former air force base in Boddam in community ownership. I'm pleased to say that the other project I've been engaged in in Strichen has been much more successful, modest in its aim and ambition perhaps, but hugely important to that community and it has been totally successful. So I have some experience of the requirement and the desire to streamline the current buyout process. I understand why we need to consider why the current requirements for information are rather too onerous, whether the timescales currently required by law are sufficiently flexible. As part of this analysis, we'll asked the review group to look at how we can prevent land being marketed in a way which hinders community purchase, for example, by owners not publicising their desire to sell, and I would like the review group to explore issues relating to the community purchase of land which has been on the market for some time. Sometimes communities become interested in purchasing land sometime after it has been put up for sale. When that happens, as the way the current legislation is drafted, they can actually be stopped from registering an interest. These sorts of areas strike me as genuine, practical barriers. They matter, if they can be addressed, it'll help make the right to buy legislation work more effectively. And let me say that I talk little about my experience as a constituency Member of Parliament. I have experienced over the last week, as First Minister of Scotland, in the intricacy of some of the legal processes which are part of the current legislative framework. I was hoping to be able, this very day, to make a further announcement about a further success for the Community Right to Buy, which is being held up not by any lack of willingness to buy, or for that matter, in this case, any lack of willingness to sell, but by part of the legislative framework, which intricately makes it actually difficult to complete the transaction. Then that'll be overcome, but it is an interesting example of the hurdles that the current legislation often puts, sometimes inadvertently, on the path of community ownership. But these changes are just part of a much broader commitment that I want to make today. The Scottish Government will consult later this year on a draft Community Empowerment and Renewal Bill. I confirm absolutely that draft bill will include provisions for an improved Community Right to Buy. There will be a legislative framework which enhances that right. The Land Reform Review Group's work of course will have a vital role to play as we draft, consult and then prepare to introduce legislation. The group's interim report has already made it clear that it will

consider closely the proposal from Community Land Scotland, which of course sought to establish an agency to facilitate the transfer of land. Of course one of the review group's six new work streams will investigate how such a land agency might operate. It sends a powerful signal that the final report will give Community Land Scotland's proposals all of the attention that is required. This work will be complemented by that of the farm tenancies review which will start later this year; a review which will be able to use some of the evidence obtained by the Land Reform Review Group as a point for its own deliberations. Overall the land reform process has the opportunity to lead to legislation which will achieve a lasting impact. The outcome of that process will be a stronger economy and a fairer society.

Now I want to look at improvements which don't need legislation; the Scottish Land Fund, renewable energy, National Forest Land Scheme. There are practical measures which we can take to strengthen community ownership now. I hope that further ideas will emerge of course from the review group, but I want to set out what the Scottish Government is doing right now. As this conference knows, we re-established the community land fund last year in order to facilitate this process. It is rather difficult to have a community purchase when there is no fund in order for the communities to purchase, or at least no fund which supports the range of community purchases, and that's why we re-established the fund. The fund has been widely welcome, it's worth six million pounds over the three years to 2011. It has already helped five community buyouts, in the Scottish borders, in Colintraive in Argyll, in Easter Ross, the Mull of Galloway, in Wigtownshire and in Lossiemouth in Moray. I can announce today that the Community Land Fund will continue across the term of this Parliament to the end of the current Parliament in 2016 and therefore, there'll be an allocation of another three million pounds, a 50% increase, during the financial year of 2015-2016. That funding, and the assurance of continuity of funding, which lies behind it, is a signal of the strength of our commitment to community ownership. A recognition that even in the toughest of budgetary times, it's more important than ever to empower local communities and to help them to help themselves. In addition to the Land Fund, we want, wherever we can to help communities to invest in renewable developments, both through direct ownership and commercial partnerships. The example provided by some of the projects engaged in by people representing groups today has been inspirational, I've mentioned Eigg and Loch Carnan, but Gigha's forth wind turbine which was announced two weeks ago will provide the community with more than one million pound of benefit over the lifetime of the project; money which can contribute directly to a housing improvement programme. In total 204 megawatts of community locally owned renewable castate is already operational, that's enough to power a hundred thousand homes. But we want to see more community ownership, more community benefits. It was after all the aim and intention of Tom Johnston's hydro board that the natural renewable energy resources of the highlands benefitted the people of the highlands. It's now the government's duty to ensure that Scotland's second renewable revolution benefits people and communities across the country. And that's about benefits as well as ownership. Our Community and Renewable Energy Scheme helps communities to build their own renewable schemes, but also to negotiate with developers from community benefits from commercial schemes. There are more than 60 community benefit funds across Scotland, which currently bring in payments of more than four million pounds. Now, I believe there is scope for taking that much further, and that's why we're currently consulting on the planning framework to have a further application of community benefits, for example it might be possible to use planning powers to ensure that renewable energy schemes provide a greater share of their benefits to

community assets. As things stand, we've led the way with our own public agencies; Forestry Commission Scotland has negotiated five thousand pounds per megawatt of benefit, which was more than twice the previous industry standard. That has had the effect of bringing certain of the developers; Vattenfall, SSE and to be fair some others, in to line with that announcement and recommendation that I made last year. I noticed yesterday that the UK government has now followed suit for schemes in England. Finally, the Scottish Government has responsibilities as a land owner, as a major land owner, to make community ownership easier. The National Forest Land Scheme enables communities to buy local woodlands from Forestry Commission Scotland, even where that land has not been put up for sale. That scheme has enabled communities in Argyll, North West Mull to purchase forestry land, and of course here in Sleat the Forestry Commission sold almost a thousand acres to Sleat Community Trust in 2011 and the community's exploring options for establishing a turbine on the land, and has established a five year plan for harvesting timber, developing infrastructure and creating new amenities.

It's worth noting, ladies and gentlemen, that we've been able to make that progress with the Forestry Commission because we control the Forestry Commission, because it's a devolved structure. Many of you will be aware of the position in Cape Wrath at the present moment, where there's been a tension as to whether Cape Wrath would be further developed as an area of community land ownership. Ensuring that the Scottish National Trail will take us from the borders to the very tip of the mainland of Scotland, or whether it will become part of an enlarged bombing range – this is a difficult choice is it not? – and therefore we shall look with interest as to the outcome of that particular tussle. Not just look with interest but act with interest in the next few weeks. The important point I'm making is that much of the success in turning the public agencies of Scotland into enablers of a desirable goal is because they are the public agencies of Scotland. The Crown Estate and the Ministry of Defence between them own a hundred and fifty thousand acres of land in Scotland, I look forward to the day – and that day is coming ladies and gentlemen – when these agencies will be subject to the democratic political will of Scotland and will enable these agencies to act in the socially responsible manner that the Forestry Commission is now pursuing in the form of community land ownership. I think it is important that Scotland's public land moves in to community hands.

Ladies and gentlemen, we have a huge opportunity to shape a stronger and better relationship between our land and our people. Community Land Scotland is a hugely important voice in that debate and that opportunity. I said at the start of my speech that Sabhal Mòr is in an area which was previously marked by depopulation and decline. Sorley Maclean, if you remember, saw the herbs and flowers of aspirations forty years ago. And the regeneration of Sleat shows how these aspirations as a result, as a result entirely of community leadership have been fulfilled here in recent decades. The aspirations of community buyouts are being fulfilled. What members of Community Land Scotland have achieved in Knoydart, Neilston, Machrihanish and Mackay Country, on Gigha, and Eigg and Rum is genuinely inspirational for the rest of the country. But I've learned as we look at these matters that in terms of galvanising effort, in terms of having the whole public body of Scotland exercised in a transformation, it is important, it is necessary, to set targets. To set targets which may people say are ambitious, some people say are over ambitious, but nonetheless setting the target enables the galvanisation of the effort and makes achievement possible. Some years ago I set a target for renewable energy generation in Scotland of 50% by 2020 and it was greeted with scepticism – huge scepticism – in terms of what was achievable. Last year, last year, we're now at

40% of renewable energy generation compared with Scottish demand. The 50% target is now for 2015. 2020 is 100% target now. Some years ago the Scottish Parliament united across the parties, unanimously, as being the only Parliament in the world, as far as I know, to endorse the idea of a carbon reduction target by 2020 unanimously as part of the Scottish Government's response to greenhouse gasses and to the climate change agenda. It was thought that 42% was an over ambitious target which was unachievable anywhere in the Western World. The statistics realised today show that Scotland's emissions have now achieved a reduction of 29.6% compared to the average of the EU member states of 17%. Well on our way to achieving that incredibly ambitious 42% target by 2020.

In each of these areas, and in others, what I've learned as First Minister – and I have learned one or two things as First Minister – that the setting of the target is an important part of galvanising the public body in order to make the achievement more possible. It doesn't in itself of course make the achievement – the renewable energy target has been assisted by the campaigners and the developers of renewable energy, the climate change target has been assisted by the engagement across industry and social policy, as well as the Parliament. The mere setting of the target doesn't make it necessary or inevitable to achieve, but without the target then there's always the danger that the level of ambition falls. And I'm conscious of the experience, the practical experience, of Tom Johnston when he set himself an idea of bringing electricity to the highlands of Scotland and then went about practically, pragmatically, radically, but above all – in terms of performance – the ability to achieve it. And that's why I think from today's conference, what I want to do is to set another target, and this is for community land ownership in Scotland. I believe it is possible, I believe it is necessary, for us to set a target of one million acres of Scotland in community land ownership by 2020. It is a target which has been articulated indeed by this organisation in the past. I think if we engage the Scottish body politics, if we engage the legislation but above all the practical steps that's necessary to take then we can achieve such a target. I'm well aware, indecently, that size of acreage is not the only thing that matters. Of course land matters for economic, strategic, sometimes symbolic reasons, not just a question of size. But in terms of the overall scale of ambition, to galvanise the Scottish public body politic in order to achieve that aim strikes me as the right time and level of ambition to make it.

I'm struck by the fact, and we have a number of opportunities before us, ladies and gentlemen, that I'd rather live in a Scotland with one million acres in community land ownership than in a country which doesn't have that ambition and that target. And that's why, from this conference today, I'm setting the target, well aware that the people in this audience are exactly the people who've demonstrated that such an ambition can be realised.

Thank you very much.