

*Community Land Scotland Conference Address – David Cameron
June 6th 2014*

WELCOME SLIDE

Friends, can I add my warm welcome to the welcomes which you already received from Angela and Councillor David Alston to this our 4th Annual Conference.

Can I ask you David to convey our thanks to your colleagues within Highland Council for their continued and strong support for the cause of land reform and for support of this conference, it is very much appreciated.

I also want to thank the Esmee Fairbairn Foundation who this year have agreed to offer Community Land Scotland some core finance with which to carry on our work for the coming three years.

This support is vital to us and, indeed, without it, we would not be able to be continue what we are doing. Again it is a pleasure to be at Sabhal Mor Ostaig who looked after us so well last year.

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SHAPING CHANGE

Our annual conference has become an important event, not just for our members but as a place for dialogue about important land and rural development issues of the day and between our members and a range of key players.

It is good to see that we all can contribute to helping shape change through the exchange of ideas and debate, and that is the theme of this year's Conference – 'shaping change', in the context of land and how we achieve more diverse and productive ownership of it.

We were delighted, and if truth be told, just a bit surprised, when the First Minister last year, in this very room, announced he wanted to see a doubling of the amount of land in community ownership by 2020.

We were surprised, but I gathered afterwards than his civil servants were even more surprised than us!

I said to the First Minister that day that if he gave us the tools, we would deliver that target, and I want to return to that in what I say in a moment or two.

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It was pointed out that It is one of the slightly curious things about my existence as Chair of Community Land Scotland that although I now spend a fair amount of time across Scotland contributing at events and setting out the vision we are developing about how we can all help to shape a better future for people, yet I have never done that to this Conference, and that is something that was suggested should be rectified

Today, I believe we stand closer than for a very long time in being able to make progress to empower more people and communities in Scotland, as a key to future local success.

To make that progress, it will require the political will of Ministers to make some important decisions, but the prize to be had by making the right decisions would be transformational.

I hope that, despite some strident voices against making those important decisions, Scottish Government Ministers will be aware that they will have wide-ranging support for providing the means to change the way land is owned and managed in Scotland – to make that ownership fairer and to allow communities to determine for themselves a more sustainable future.

And in that I also hope that Ministers will have the support of other political parties. It certainly seems that way at the moment with the exception of the Conservatives.

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INTERNATIONAL CONTEXT

During the course of this year Community Land Scotland organised a small international seminar on the theme of land reform and human rights.

In holding that seminar we wanted to look outward to other continents, other nations, to get a deeper understanding of land reform in a wider context and to explore what we could learn and what we could contribute.

It was striking in looking beyond our own shores to be reminded just how different Scotland is, how far we lag behind other nations in the unreformed nature of our land ownership patterns.

We have possibly the most concentrated patterns of landownership anywhere in the western world.

The consequences from this are enormous:

- concentrating influence
- concentrating power
- concentrating wealth
- in very few hands

Changing this is not something to apologise for, nor something to be afraid of in Scotland or elsewhere.

Because through that international seminar, as well as learning of the land struggles around the globe today that are so reminiscent of our own history, we also learned that our cause of land reform, of securing a greater diversity of ownership of land, is supported in international agreements about land tenure.

The Voluntary Guidance on Land Tenure approved by the United Nations and the G8 gives a clear framework for thinking about land questions and it legitimises for governments, including obviously the Scottish Government, some very significant actions which they can take to bring about changes in land tenure.

At times within Scotland listening to the commentary of the forces for the status quo, you might be forgiven for thinking that land reform was simply the interest of a few home-grown and delinquent Bolsheviks. This far from the truth.

We have also been told that to question the established pattern of land ownership was somehow wrong-headed, and impossible anyway in the face of the human rights of the current private landowners. Again...this is far from the truth.

In fact, land reform is an international cause and the International Land Coalition who enriched our discussions at our seminar has also helped us see more clearly how we can shape a new future for landownership.

They have adopted and promote a framework of actions under what they call 'people centred land governance'.

People centred land governance seems to me to be what we are essentially about.

Land is not simply about private interests;
it's not about a private and tradable commodity,
it's not about just an investment to grow wealth,
it's not about a plaything to be enjoyed by the privileged few.

Land should be about the people who live and work on that land

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PEOPLE-CENTRED LAND GOVERNANCE

I have been delighted in the last two weeks to see that the Land Reform Review Group in its final report has itself adopted the notion of 'people centred land governance' as being what encapsulates what they think is central to the future of land in Scotland.

But they have done more, they have themselves established some very important principles about land, and at the same time they have exposed some of the myths we hear every day about landownership in Scotland

The LRRG has set new terms for the land debate in Scotland by stating clearly that land is a ***“finite and crucial resource and that it requires to be used and owned in the public interest and for the common good”***.

These are great words, with important consequences.

The Land Reform Review Group are right to contend that land ownership in Scotland is not just a matter of private interest, but there requires to be a balance between private rights and the public interest for the common good.

And they are right to make clear that the common good is about the well being of society as a whole

They are right to query the statement that the land question in Scotland is about use not ownership. It is just plain common-sense that the use of land depends on who owns it.

They are also right to make clear that as mentioned in the Paic Trust situation even now, human rights considerations extend beyond the European Convention on Human Rights, which of course itself is allows the possibility of the public interest to prevail when balanced against private rights and interests.

Human rights expressed in the UN Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights gives everyone the right to an adequate standard of living and to the continuous improvement of living conditions.

And finally - I welcome the LRRG saying that more diverse land ownership patterns would open up increased economic and social opportunities, the achievement of which would be in the public interest. In community owned land we see that every day.

Having these principles in the public domain gives a clear rationale for the detailed recommendations that Land Reform Review Group make.

I believe the ground in this debate is moving at last, it is being framed differently – it is about people centred land governance, about the public interest for the common good.

And for those strident voices who want to hold on to the status quo, they need to explain how the public interest and the common good is met by our anachronistic, over concentrated land ownership patterns.

Simply saying that a huge amount of good economic activity takes place on private land that is in so few hands, isn't enough.

If most of the land is in a few private hands there is by definition nowhere much else for that economic activity it to take place, and proves little.

Our own economic indicators work shows that where communities have taken control, they are out-performing the past owners of that land. You will hear more on this shortly from Amanda Bryan.

Are these same strident voices really saying that there are no circumstances whatsoever, which might warrant interventions to re-balance and achieve more diverse ownership in support of the public interest and common good?

Are they saying that we simply have to accept that in all and every circumstance the market is to prevail?

In the face of our concentrated land ownership patterns, and with evidence that more and more land is falling into fewer and fewer hands, the need has never been greater for ways to consider what is in the public interest.

This is not about academic or political questions, this is about finding the means to affect all our futures to:

- create a greater common good
- improve the lives of many ordinary people
- provide more opportunities for more people
- build stronger communities through landownership

And this is what I now want to concentrate on in the rest of what I say.

THE ROLE OF COMMUNITY LAND SCOTLAND

When introducing the First Minister last year that I mentioned the decline in my own community of North Harris, seen its population halve in my lifetime – many in this room have shared similar experience.

It is not just a rural situation, all too many of our urban communities are subject to similar forces which trap them in declining circumstances with limited opportunities and a lack of control.

We know that communities being able to get hold of key land and other community assets, can be liberating and can provide the basis for an enriched and more sustainable future.

Within Community Land Scotland, within the Development Trust Association, and within Community Woodland owners, we now have a deeper understanding of what can make for success in communities taking control of vital assets.

We see it this way – you need four things to deliver more empowered communities, and they are all needed in combination.

First communities themselves must be motivated to want to act to change their place, to take more responsibility – no-one should force communities into action before they are ready.

Second, there needs to be flexible support to communities which wish to act.

That can be simply sharing with them the experience of others, but there also needs to be legal, financial and technical help when needed.

There is now a lot of experience in how to do this effectively, particularly in the Highlands and Islands, but that expertise is needed more widely.

Third, you need in place funding to support communities in making key purchases of land and associated assets, for which we now know there is a substantial Public Investment Dividend.

And fourth, (this the point we are almost at today) you need the political will to provide the right framework of law to support community aspirations and actions and help them win through, by giving them rights.

The vital existing legal element, in this context, is the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003 which gives a 'Right to Buy', but which we know needs updated and to include extended community rights if we are to make more progress.

The Land Reform Review Group has clearly signalled the way forward to do this and there will be the opportunity at this conference to explore all that a good deal more.

As well as the role of promoting policy to establish these four necessities for community landowning success, Community Land Scotland has a specific role in helping communities understand the process involved in land purchase and the plusses and minuses of taking control of their own future.

This year, with the support of Highland Council and an input from HIE we are running a series of day events for communities the length and breadth of the Highland Council area to extend understanding of what community landownership can offer.

We are not saying to anyone they should do it, we are not seeking to persuade them to do it.

We are simply sharing the experience of those who have done it, what can happen as a result, and how to move forward if you want to.

Those collaborations need to continue and we need to take the same message to new aspiring communities more widely across Scotland.

Community Land Scotland also has a role of assisting existing community landowners to develop further.

We now, all of us together, have more experience of how to do this community landownership business than ever before.

Each year our experience grows, but we have yet to fully deploy that for the benefit of all of us.

We need to build our knowledge exchange mechanisms to be able to learn from each-other.

Each year new specific challenges come along.....currently Broadband, Foreshore ownership, difficulties with getting houses built and State Aid have been brought to our attention by members

We need to help individual members with their particular aspirations .

These are some of the challenges that Community Land Scotland will be looking to meet over the coming months and years. There may be more and this conference gives you as members an opportunity to guide us in our future work.

I would like to say a few more words relevant to aspiring communities about one proposal which we recommended to the LRRG and where Community Land Scotland may have a role.

A key part of our vision for the future is that a community with a desire to purchase land and assets needs to get together with the owner of that land and assets to negotiate amicable potential asset transfers.

This is the way in practice that most community land purchases take place today.

Such discussions can be difficult, testing to all parties, but must be the right way to proceed.

We are learning more about how such discussions can work, what the components need to be, what expectations on timescales might be realistic to meet both parties sets of interests.

Within Community Land Scotland we now have real practical experience of acting in a mediation role.

But the current situation though is too ad-hoc.

That is why we have been advocating the establishment of a Land Agency to help facilitate discussion and negotiation, and mediation if necessary.

The Land Reform Review Group has recommended progress on such arrangements and this is welcome, even if their recommendation is not exactly what we have proposed and which we will continue to seek.

We feel that this is an area the Scottish Government needs to take forward from the Land Reform Review Group report.

The 'land agency' is one of the tools we need to deliver more community landownership and move towards the million acres target.

I hope it is something that the representatives of the large private landed interests can also see has potential and can contribute to.

So, when we strengthen our national policy on land by necessary changes to legislation, when we build capacity to share experience and expertise across aspiring and existing community landowners, when we facilitate proper constructive discussion between communities and the current landholders, then we can begin to see our vision of a better Scotland

OUR VISION

Our vision is all about renewed, more resilient, vibrant and sustainable communities.

I want to hear the echo of children's voices as they play at their local school, possibly the one that closed in years past.

I want to see young families being able to find a decent home in which to bring up those children.

I want those children to have the choice to be able to stay and live and work in the community in which they were born if they want to, because there is decent and well paid employment.

I want to see our distinct cultures and language, our music, our dance, our literature grow - because we have people living locally to allow that to happen.

I want to see our communities connected to the wider world with the best available technology, and yes, we can help deliver the infrastructure for that.

I want to see more people having the confidence to invest in local businesses of their own, contributing to the greater overall well-being of our communities.

I want to see more people wish to come and live where their forebears once felt the need to leave - because we have created the opportunities to do so.

I want to see our rural communities being ever less dependent on the state, because we have access to the resources to allow us all to stand ever more firmly on our own feet.

Just as I want to see our communities ever less dependent on the owners who control land at the expense and to the detriment of the people who live and work on that land.

That is what all the debate is about; it is about real living, dynamic, sustainable communities.

That is why change in the law is important, but it is only a means to an end, not an end in itself.

In that future I hope to see, many more community landowners acting as development agents for their community's growth.

But my vision for the future is not one of community landownership alone, simply shifting from one form of dominant ownership to another such form.

Within the vision Community Land Scotland has there will be continuing private land ownership.

Not every community sees its future as one in community landownership and I respect that.

But my vision for private ownership is to embrace many more private owners, many more agricultural tenancies which are secure and can be assigned and can bring people to the land and keep them on it.

In delivering this vision, such has been the decline of so many of our rural communities, in too many places there are no people left – where the sound of voices drifted away long ago.

We need to find ways to bring people back to those now largely deserted places, and we want to promote the idea of the re-settlement of land as we go forward, and we will find the imaginative ways and means to do that.

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Ladies and gentleman, to bring about the vision we have for the communities we serve, and which we know is shared by many others in this room and by government, **change to how land is owned in Scotland is a necessary component.**

With the growing debate and support for the need for change, and with findings of the Land Reform Review Group, there is now a way forward.

The issue of delivering change needs to be dealt with, it cannot be ducked or we will simply limit the opportunities for the vision of the greater common good the Land Reform Review Group has articulated.

I urge the Scottish Government to grasp the opportunity, to consult quickly on the recommendations, and to use the coming Community Empowerment Bill to maximum effect in taking forward and delivering necessary tools to deliver the change in land ownership patterns we need to see.

We feel we have come a long way in the four years of our life in Community Land Scotland.

We now understand more of what we need to do in policy and practice to allow more people to understand and share in a changed and better future.

Land is a finite resource and it sits right at the centre of all our futures. That is why it is right that it is managed in the public interest for the common good.

People centred land governance – a democratic concept - is a concept that will help drive important change.

We thank you all for what you have done, to help bring us all to the point where an agenda for necessary change now has shape and purpose, and from which we can progress.

There are still many more miles to travel.

We hope you will continue with us in those travels and together we can develop a better future.

| Thank you for listening.