

David Cameron – Chair Community Land Scotland

Good afternoon everyone and a warm welcome to the 7th Community Land Scotland annual conference.

Once again, it is a great pleasure to see so many of you here – members of CLS, and also the increasing number of others who take an interest in our work and support us in advancing the cause of the community ownership of land.

And it is great to be back at Sabhal Mor Ostaig – a truly outstanding venue for friendly dynamic discussions on many important issues which face us.

I had not expected to be standing before you today, having retired as Chair of CLS a couple of years ago!

The reason I am here is that Lorne MacLeod our Chair for the last two years had to stand down from the Board as a result of his welcome appointment to the newly created Land Commission, to avoid any thoughts of there being a conflict of interest.

I want to very sincerely thank Lorne, who is here today, for all of the considerable effort and expertise he brought to Chairing CLS, and I know he will take that experience of land questions to the Land Commission as they develop their agenda.

We are very pleased today to have Andrew Thin, the Chair of the Scottish Land Commission to address us, and I will introduce him shortly.

Before I do that, however, I would like to reflect a little on what I see when I look at Community Land Scotland and the land question in Scotland more generally.

PROGRESS

1. Having been away from the Chair for a couple of years, then coming back temporarily, I have been struck by the progress we have made in really quite a short time, but also very aware of the significant job that remains to be done if we are to see true land reform and injustices inherent in Scotland's land ownership patterns addressed.

My own motivation for getting involved in community land ownership was from witnessing the steady decline of my community in North Harris, a decline mirrored in too many communities in Scotland.

Today, although the situation is still challenging, we are seeing the dividends of community ownership not just in Harris but all across the country.

In many communities we are seeing new developments in housing, in new job creation, infrastructure investment, in strengthening, culture, in caring for and improving our environment, all these building confidence in our areas to do even more.

2. It is a matter of real pleasure to now see urban land questions come to the fore, to see new rights and powers put in the hands of urban communities, as well as rural communities.

We have been very pleased to see that the work of our Development Manager, Lindsay Chalmers, who, with the support of Scottish Government funding, taking the message of community ownership opportunities into our great cities and towns as well as the south of Scotland and the northern isles.

For too long community ownership was seen as a 'Highlands and Islands thing', well if that was the case, it most certainly is not the case now.

3. There are 4 elements to see more progress in community ownership. We need supportive law and public policy, sufficient early funding, and practical support for communities to match the clear community desire.

I can see that all these elements have strengthened considerably over recent years, due is no small part, if I may say so, to the efforts you as members and supporters along with the Board and staff of Community Land Scotland have made to bring about those changes.

We are living through a period of very supportive development of public policy.

We even now have a Cabinet Secretary for Land Reform and we know we have her support in what we seek to do.

STILL TO ADDRESS

1. A few general comments because, coming back to Chair CLS, albeit briefly, I begin to wonder if we are not currently losing momentum on large land purchases again.

I would love to see another large piece of land move into community ownership; indeed I think it is necessary. It could be combined with another wish and that is to see a breakthrough in the south of Scotland.

It is perhaps through forestry, though by no means should it be exclusively through forestry purchases, that the new and significant ownership opportunities of scale may arise in the forthcoming period.

We have been exploring with others some exciting new possibilities in how these forestry purchases may be financed.

2. I would like to see Scotland's archaic land ownership pattern beginning to change faster.

Power is still concentrated in too few hands, wealth is still being increasingly concentrated, and that limits the widening of opportunities to share more fairly the yields of land ownership.

Those with ready access to capital, some of the wealthiest people in the world, can turn up in Scotland and buy up pretty much what they want, without having to do anything, other than sign the cheque.

I don't doubt the good intentions of many such owners, but there is something fundamentally wrong when personal aspirations of a wealthy elite come ahead of the aspirations and needs of a great many people, sometimes just to give a means to further enhance their wealth.

For communities to own land, they have to show that their actions will be in the public interest, will further sustainable development and they have hurdle after hurdle to clear before they can own.

Yet a thick enough personal cheque-book can circumvent all that.

3. One matter that emerged at our last conference and on which we plan some work this coming year, was the question of renewal and re-population of often empty land where once there were vibrant communities.

What is worrying in rural Scotland in particular is that there are now a range of established views, policies and forms of designation on land use, that seek or have the effect of keeping our countryside devoid of people.

Those policies value emptiness, what some perceive as wildness, and give scenic considerations a higher value, it can seem, than the value of having people in the landscape.

We want to see the local opinion being given greater recognition, not to wreck what we all value in our often stunning landscapes, but to find a greater balance between the legitimate interests and needs of local people for homes and employment opportunities, alongside the wider and also legitimate interests of others.

LOOKING AT COMMUNITY LAND SCOTLAND ITSELF

CLS has been taking stock recently of where we want land policy to develop.

Through that process we realise that one of the key things that distinguishes us as an organisation is that we explicitly argue for change to re-balance power in our society.

This can be difficult and challenging territory for vested interests, but it is territory that needs to be occupied, one that proclaims the need for change and that the status quo in Scotland's land is not acceptable in a progressive society.

We have seen the establishment of important new rights for communities, but these represent only small steps on what is a longer journey.

We concluded in our Strategy Review that CLS still needs to be a voice arguing for potentially very radical reform, and to encourage other voices to speak up too. This was subsequently endorsed by the membership.

We are particularly pleased that the Scottish Government, with the pretty near unanimous support of Parliament, has established the new Scottish Land Commission.

That Commission, for us, is a key vehicle for addressing long-standing and difficult land questions.

Very importantly, it can bring about change; greater equality, greater social justice, a means to fulfil people's human rights through land reform.

We have already met the Land Commission and we have set out our stall to them on some of the issues we would like to see addressed:

PUBLIC INTEREST

We feel it is in Scotland's public interest as to how our vital national resource of land is owned; how there can be more opportunity for more people through the ownership of what should be our shared inheritance of the land.

We believe there is a need to have a public interest test available, where Ministers can ask questions about whether currently owned land is being held in ways that support the public interest.

Similarly Ministers should be able to ask the same question where land is about to change hands, about whether the **new** ownership is likely to serve the public interest.

Where this is not the situation then powers of intervention to potentially require even the break-up of land-holdings, or interventions in land markets will inevitably be necessary.

TAXATION

Taxation and how it works to discourage further concentration of land ownership, or to encourage greater diversity of ownership is an area we would also like to see considered.

MONOPOLIES

We believe that Scotland has a number of significant local land monopolies.

Governments down the centuries, through some of the earliest statutes ever created, have sought to protect people from monopolies in trade and in instruments of great influence, such as the media.

In these areas, society recognises that monopolies can, indeed mostly do, deliver effects that are bad for the people as a whole, and it intervenes and regulates to counteract these effects.

We believe that local land monopolies too can have tangible and serious negative effects, yet little has been done to examine this, and little or none of the recent thoughts about land in Scotland has been framed in these terms.

So, we firmly believe that the question of local land monopolies in Scotland warrants close examination, and policy developed to address the issues.

LAND RIGHTS and RESPONSIBILITIES STATEMENT

We are soon to see the publication of the Scottish Government's Land Rights and Responsibilities Statement, required by the 2016 Land Reform Act.

We believe the draft Statement recently published for consultation was not nearly as strong as it could have been, and we have been arguing for a strengthening of that Statement.

The Land Commission too, in one of its first pieces of published work, has pointed to ways in which strengthening of the Statement could be achieved.

With that Statement comes an opportunity to set out clearly to everyone that with land come great responsibilities, not just to individuals or shareholders or other stakeholders but to wider needs and aspirations of society.

And the larger the land holding, or the more strategic it is in the urban context, arguably the greater the responsibilities.

Historically land debate in Scotland has focused on rights and not responsibilities. This needs to change.

For CLS and many others these issues are exactly the sort of issues that the Land Commission gives us the opportunity to explore thoroughly.

We are certainly hoping that these complex and potentially controversial topics will find a place on their agenda, and a 'quick win' for the Commission would be to establish a clear programme which embraced some radical possibilities.

That would send a very good signal.

That leads me now to introduce the man with the task of leading the Land Commission, to tell us something of how the Commission will go about its work, how it will engage with our and others' interests, and perhaps give us insights into what are the range of issues that they are having put to them for consideration.

I make clear that we cannot expect, less than two months from its establishment, a detailed work programme, but we welcome the fact that Andrew Thin has agreed to be with us today to introduce us to the Commission and its work and its duties and responsibilities.

Andrew Thin, as Chair of the Commission brings extensive experience of public administration and policy.

He has held a number of public appointments; he is a past Chair of SNH; he has served on the Crofters Commission; is a past Chief Executive of a Highland Local Enterprise Company within HIE; he has until recently been the interim Tenant Farming Commissioner; he has led a review of Wild Fisheries policy; he currently Chairs the Canals body for Scotland; he is a past Chair of the John Muir Trust; and I could go on...

After Andrew has spoken there will be an opportunity for questions and discussion.

Andrew, we thank you for being with us today, and look forward to what you have to say.

Please welcome Andrew Thin, Chair of the Scottish Land Commission.