

Lorne MacLeod

“It would be great to see more fellow CAs providing advisory, planning, accountancy and other services to community groups going through the process of land ownership”

“THE LAY of the Land” article in July’s edition of *The CA* magazine provided, what I feel, was a one-sided view of land reform, and I think it is important to provide an alternative viewpoint. I appreciate that the subject of land ownership can often lead to heated discussions but the aspiration for land in Scotland to be an asset that “benefits the many, not the few” does not appear to me to be a disagreeable aspiration. Can it be right in the second decade of the 21st century that a mere 432 landowners own 50 per cent of the private land in Scotland?

The purpose of land reform is not to be able to present a national scorecard on land holdings that looks more equitable; the purpose is to distribute power and influence more widely and effectively, to release economic and social development potential and opportunity. To give more people access to the wealth of the land is to widen opportunity, and to contribute to creating a more enterprising Scotland.

Community land ownership is only one aspect of land reform. Something very remarkable and positive has been happening in some of the more peripheral parts of Scotland, where community after community has voted to take ownership of their land. Those communities are now helping fashion a new future, houses are being built, energy is being generated, new work spaces and agricultural land holdings are being created, driven by local people with the common interest of securing a sustainable future.

I have seen from my involvement in Scotland’s largest community buy-out – of the 93,000-acre estate covering much of the islands of Eriskay, South Uist and Benbecula in the Outer Hebrides – just how effective community ownership has been for a remote and fragile local economy.

The estate was previously owned by a mainland-based syndicate of families who enjoyed shooting and fishing pursuits in the islands. Since the buy-out, a £10m harbour redevelopment has been undertaken at Lochboisdale, creating a new fisheries pier, a

marina, and land for commercial and housing development. Three 2.3MW turbines, wholly owned by the community, were erected in 2013 and have already generated more than £1.7m of funds for reinvestment in the community. An Old Tom Morris 18-hole golf course at Askernish has been restored, and is now attracting golfers from around the world. These projects, and others, combine to have a transformational effect on the community, and help reverse population loss, as well as creating job opportunities and new businesses in the islands.

The Scottish Government has set a target of one million acres of land to be in community ownership by 2020.

Currently, just 500,000 acres are in community ownership. There aren’t many emerging sectors which have the potential for 100 per cent growth within a five-year time period. It would be great to see more fellow CAs involved in providing advisory, business planning, accountancy and other services to community groups going through the process of acquisition of land, and helping them with the subsequent development and regeneration projects.

Community landownership should not be seen as solely a Highlands & Islands issue. The Community Empowerment (Scotland) Bill which has now gained royal assent, and the new Land Reform Bill currently working its way through the Scottish Parliament, together present fantastic opportunities for both urban and rural communities throughout Scotland to take forward proposals to reinvigorate their localities. Much support and advice shall be required, and we as CAs should be at the forefront in responding to this need. **CA**

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LORNE MACLEOD CA IS CHAIRMAN OF COMMUNITY LAND SCOTLAND, A CHARITY REPRESENTING THE INTERESTS OF COMMUNITY LANDOWNERS



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