

Scotland's land reform : time to reverse the trend

It is telling that within weeks of a Land Reform Bill passing in our Parliament, we are discussing the future of land reform in Scotland with renewed vigour.

Land reform – changing how land is owned, managed and leased – is a fundamental necessity in Scotland. Who owns land in Scotland has a direct impact upon the opportunity for economic development and wealth generation, and how the benefits of that are spread or alternatively extracted to benefit only a few.¹

We have one of the most concentrated patterns of landownership anywhere in the world and some truly enormous landholdings, both of which make us an international anomaly. This concentration is only getting worse, with 421 landowners owning 50% of the private rural land compared to 440 in 2012,² despite several pieces of land reform legislation. This fact is much used, and rightly so as it is a shocking figure. But the real damage is what lies behind the statistics.

Land being in the hands of so few in Scotland has resulted in a rural housing crisis, inflated land prices, depleted biodiversity, an unsustainable industrial forestry sector, an inequitable food system and an agricultural sector which is growing more consolidated and stifling new entrants. You don't just have to take my word for it. The United Nations have explicitly encouraged member states to pursue policies and legal frameworks which avoid the concentration of landownership.³ The Scottish Land Commission have research showing that concentrated landownership increases inequality and is bad for growth.⁴

Arguments for the status quo will always be made by those who hold the land and power, but these arguments are tired and ignore clear evidence. Scotland cannot move toward being a fairer, more just and equitable society until we break the hold of a tiny number of people, corporations and trusts owning so much of our natural resources. It's time to reverse the trend. No more concentration into fewer and fewer hands, but instead the blossoming of a diverse, equitable and ultimately more productive and just landownership system.

This is an issue not just of interest to land reformers and communities who want to own land. Land reform touches upon all of our lives as citizens facing housing shortages, rising food prices, growing inequality and ecosystem collapse. The recent research by the Revive Coalition and the Scottish Land Commission has shown the depth of support from the public for land

¹ [Investigation into the Issues Associated with Large scale & Concentrated Landownership in Scotland, Scottish Land Commission, March 2019](#)

² [Who Owns Scotlands 2024 - Land Matters](#)

³ [g2300035.pdf \(un.org\)](#), p.9.

⁴ [5dd7d2d0d7022_infographic-web.pdf](#)

reform measures, with 96% of respondents to the SLC consultation saying there needed to be change in how land is used and owned. We know the scale of the issue, and we know that people want change.

So where does the latest Land Reform Bill leave us?

In some ways, it could be seen as a step forward. There will be far greater transparency on land transactions over 1000ha, or from landholdings over 1000ha. For the first time, the state will have statutory powers to proactively intervene in land sales and break up large landholdings if deemed to be in the public interest or necessary for community sustainability, such as helping to address depopulation.

This Bill, if supported by strong guidance and utilised fully by the Scottish Government, should support community ownership; for example, in some instances, it could help break the power of large private land monopolies and provide new opportunities for communities.

However, we must also recognise that the Bill does not go far enough to bring about real land reform and ultimately change Scotland's unequal land ownership pattern. It does not intervene structurally in the land market. It does not assess who is buying land in Scotland. It does not provide routes to challenge existing ownership. It does not change the financial and tax incentives that encourage land accumulation.

When vast tracts of land are owned and managed for private profit our local communities and wider society and economy do not see the benefits that they should and are too frequently at the whim of absentee landowners. This is not the case of a 'few bad apples' but an otherwise acceptable situation. This is a deeply entrenched systemic issue fostering inequality at the heart of society and which requires root and branch reform.

In this current Bill difficult but important decisions which would have started a more structural pattern of reform, through assessing incoming buyers of land and providing routes for changing existing landownership, were avoided. These must be returned to in the next Parliament.

Similarly, long overdue reforms to multiple forms of taxation and the laws of inheritance could deliver significant land reform outcomes. So could a progressive realignment of agricultural and forestry subsidies to favour smaller-scale, locally owned businesses. This could help reduce land prices and prevent accumulation of land by corporations, whilst also encouraging new entrants to these sectors so vital to rural Scotland. This would align with the Community Wealth Building principles which are much discussed by the Scottish Government.

It's time for the Government, at both a local and national level, to have a far greater hand in delivering land reform and strategic land planning at a regional and national scale. Community-

led land reform has been and continues to be a transformational, grassroots movement that builds local democracy alongside social and economic power, but it cannot deliver the land reform that Scotland needs alone.

Structural state-led reform is needed to break the power of monopoly landowners, reduce land prices and stop land speculation. This will in turn allow for a further blossoming of community landownership.

It's time for our political leaders, backed by the people, to grasp the thistle of real land reform and take on the powerful interests that have controlled our shared natural assets for too long. We need a country where the majority of land is owned and managed by the people, be they local communities, farmers, local businesses or the public sector.

Over a hundred years ago, a quote now mostly attributed to Mark Twain, was coined: 'Buy land, they're not making anymore of it.' Investors, asset managers, billionaires and aristocrats have heeded this advice closely and accumulated the vast majority of our land, whilst successive governments and too many of us have let it happen.

It's time for us to make sure that we collectively use and manage the land in ways which support our futures. We should have more of a stake in our land. It is our most essential common resource. Let's ensure in the next Parliament we have a government with a clear mandate to deliver this, and a public that will not accept anything less.