

Scottish ‘land reform’ is just shameless legalised theft

Duke of Buccleuch

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Some of your more generous readers might try to equate me with Hector in the television serial *Monarch of the Glen*. We do indeed have something in common with Glenbogle; all estates, on anything but good arable land, share in the struggle for economic survival. A popular misconception is that all acres are pure gold – that lots of acres automatically mean lots of wealth. Sadly, it takes 6,000 acres of our hill and bog to equal 100 acres of good arable land or a 10-acre suburban paddock.

Now that there is a suspicion that land reformers are less concerned about the countryside’s welfare than wealth distribution, as they see it, we must be a prime target, sitting on more acres than anyone. To them, all acres are worth the same. We should start from a premise with which everyone would surely agree, the ideal situation whereby there is perfect harmony between all the competing interests that make demands on the countryside: *a thriving and happy community of people; sustainable food production; sustainable timber production; nature conservation; good landscaping; public amenity and recreation; and sport*. The achievement of this ideal has been due to the traditional family estate that embodies enlightened land management, planning 100 years and more ahead, with consistent policies that transcend individual farm boundaries.

In the course of naval duty 50 years ago, I asked the communist Tito of Yugoslavia how his agrarian reforms were progressing. His interpreter hissed that I should change the subject, because they had failed and they were handing the land back to the owners. To his credit, Tito was quicker than most communist leaders to accept that the communal system of farming just did not work.

Today in Scotland, we are being ruled by a majority of Central Belt politicians who appear never to have stepped off a pavement into the countryside. Making a publicly funded paradise out of the islands of Eigg or Gigha, or the Knoydart peninsula, clearly appeals to caravan immigrants from middle England; but can these communities really be self-sustaining over a long period? The taxpayer or lottery player might reasonably expect a 10 to 20-year trial period before extending this generosity to other parts of Scotland. As for proposals for community buy-outs and the expectation of river fishings in crofting areas, even Tito might have blushed at such shameless legalised theft.

Those who want to give tenant farmers the right to buy their farms – at half the vacant possession market price – apparently believe that they are freeing forelock-tugging serfs from the captivity of oppressive landowners. They may be surprised to learn that most tenant farmers actually choose to be tenants, rather than owner-occupiers, for

very good reasons. Every one of the farm tenants on [Buccleuch Estates](#) became a tenant of his own free will, 42 percent by inheritance and 58 percent by application. Of the latter, 23 percent gave up being owner-occupiers to become estate tenants and a further 28 percent were farm workers with little hope of becoming farmers in any other way. All of them enjoy complete freedom of action, and share in the management and marketing benefits of a partnership/cooperative system.

Farms require constant reinvestment in fixed equipment – houses, steadings, roads, bridges, water supplies, drainage systems, stone walls and fencing. Rents from hill and stock-rearing farms barely cover this. The mere threat of a ‘*right to buy*’ could halt reinvestment and future farm letting.

Estate ownership is as serious a business as chains of newspapers, garages, shops or pubs. Our enterprise involves more than a 1000 people producing each year: 127,000 sheep; 13,500 head of cattle; 18 million litres of milk; 20,000 tons of cereals; and 50,000 tons of timber. At the same time, we are managing 430 square miles of beautifully landscaped and publicly accessible countryside, attending to the well-being of people and wildlife on it, opening four properties to 100,000 members of the public, looking after 1,200 houses, of which a quarter are listed buildings, keeping up more than 5,000 miles of fencing and many miles of hard roads and tracks, as well as the shared responsibility for two dozen churches and four historic houses. It is a National Trust-type of operation, without the tax advantage that the Trust enjoys.

The [Buccleuch Estates](#) have earned the reputation of being one of the most progressive and enlightened estates anywhere. To keep and enhance such a reputation requires hands-on management by members of my family, supported by a team of experienced professionals. It is because many generations of the same family have been devoted stewards of the countryside that this reputation has been won and kept. The time scale exceeds the credibility of the average town dweller; the oak trees planted today will take 200 years to mature and hopefully the new lead roof on Drumlanrig Castle will last until 2200.

The change in the pattern of land ownership has been dramatic in the past 80 years. Owner-occupation increased from 20 percent to 70 percent of all farm holdings, while much of the remainder consists of large tracts of hills whose viability is marginal or negative. It is the ownership of these areas that so excites the acre-maniacs. This explains the claim that 50 percent of Scotland is owned by only 350 people or institutions. Ninety-five percent of [Buccleuch Estates](#) has the European Union (EU) classification of ‘*severely disadvantaged*’ while countless urban and suburban properties have the same value as a fair-sized Highland estate. I wonder how property owners in Edinburgh might react if their tenants were given the right to buy at half-price?

It is not always recognised that the beauty of our landscapes owes so much to the integration of farming and forestry by estates in a way that would have been impossible to achieve with single-farm ownership. The cohesion of estates has been a power for good for all who live on them and their local communities. Picking holes in them threatens their complete break-up. Why not heed the lessons of President Tito?

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Duke of Buccleuch

The title of Duke of Buccleuch was created in the [Peerage of Scotland](#) on 20th April 1663 for James Crofts, eldest illegitimate son of Charles II of England, who had married Anne Scott, Countess of Buccleuch. In 1666, Anne was created Duchess in her own right, so that the title was not affected by Monmouth's attainder in 1685. It passed on to his descendants, who have borne the surnames Scott or Montagu-Douglas-Scott. In 1810, the Duke of Buccleuch inherited the title of Duke of Queensberry, also in the [Peerage of Scotland](#), thus separating that title from the Marquess of Queensberry. Thus, the holder is one of the only four people to hold two or more different dukedoms, the others being the Duke of Hamilton and Brandon, the Duke of Argyll and the Duke of Richmond, Lennox and Gordon.

The subsidiary titles associated with the Dukedom of Buccleuch are: Earl of Buccleuch (1619); Earl of Doncaster (1663); Earl of Dalkeith (1663); Lord Scott of Buccleuch (1606); Lord Scott of Whitechester and Eskdale (1619); and Baron Scott of Tyndale (1663). (All, except for the Earldom of Doncaster and the Barony of Scott of Tyndale, are in the Peerage of Scotland.) The courtesy title used by the Duke's eldest son and heir is Earl of Dalkeith.

Source: [Wikipedia](#), the free encyclopaedia [Duke of Buccleuch](#)

Buccleuch Estates visit: <http://www.buccleuch.com>