

HIE Chairman Speaks out on Land Reform

Dr Jim Hunter

*Address to the Annual General Meeting of the Highland Small
Communities Housing Trust*

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“Land reform is already a key element in development strategies which are helping people living in the Highlands and Islands to benefit from a growing economy and from the lowest unemployment rates the area has ever seen. The Scottish Executive is absolutely right, therefore, to be planning further reform.”

That was the message hammered home in Inverness by Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) chairman, Dr Jim Hunter, who was addressing the annual general meeting of the Highland Small Communities Housing Trust.

Sporting and angling interests have described the Scottish Executive’s land reform proposals as ‘a Mugabe-style land grab’, Dr Hunter reminded his audience of community representatives. *“This is so much claptrap.”*

“There are landowners and estate managers in the Highlands and Islands who are helping to take our area forward,” Dr Hunter continued. *“They deserve – and get – support and encouragement from the HIE network. But it would be appreciated if, in return, they’d tell the landowning lobby’s lunatic fringe to take a dive into the nearest salmon river.”*

“After all, it’s not as if the estate-owning fraternity’s overall record is one that inspires confidence. In the 19th century and for much of the 20th century, landowners were in charge of the Highlands and Islands. They began by organising the Clearances. They went on to provide some of the most unattractive working conditions in the United Kingdom.”

“If, as we’re told, sporting estates are now paying high salaries to contented employees, then I’m delighted. But many of us well remember when to be employed by a sporting estate was to live in a tied house, receive a rotten wage and be expected to engage regularly in forelock-tugging of the most demeaning and demoralising kind.”

“What we’re about at HIE is relegating that sort of Highlands and Islands to the history books. What we’re about is fostering and expanding a new economy. That’s why our population – which, in the landlord-dominated Highlands of the past, fell year after year – has gone up by some 20 percent in the last 30 years.”

“Today we have half as many folk again in employment in the Highlands and Islands as we had in the 1960s. We’ve seen jobless rates in the former unemployment black spot of Lochaber fall below 2 percent. We’ve seen Skye gain hundreds of new households and, in the process, boost its total population by nearly 50 percent.”

“Practically nothing of this is owed to the sporting estates said to be so important economically to the Highlands and Islands. The most successful rural communities in the modern Highlands and Islands are those which have turned their backs on that aspect of our heritage. They’re communities engaging with new enterprises, new activities, new ways of doing things. Among such communities are the growing number taking advantages of the opportunities opened up by land reform.”

“Take the island of Eigg. In 1997, Eigg after decades of private ownership was a depressed, de-motivated place. Today, under community ownership, Eigg is being turned round. Rents and leases have been renegotiated to provide tenants with more security and with a firmer base for investment. A company has been formed to implement a programme of badly needed housing improvements. There is full employment. A new store, a new café and a new craft shop have been built.”

“This sort of gain is measurable. More intangible, but perhaps equally vital, is the huge boost land reform gives to the self-confidence of people who have been wholly dependent for far too long on the whims of often absentee proprietors.”

“This point was well made by Ian Robertson of the Old Forge, Knoydart, when explaining his prize-winning performance in the 2001 Highlands and Islands Business Awards. Mr. Robertson was in no doubt that his business, one of Britain’s remotest hostelries, benefited greatly from the local community’s purchase of the estate on which the Old Forge stands. This purchase ended absentee ownership of Knoydart, put Knoydart people in charge of their own destinies and, as Ian Robertson recognised when picking up his well-merited reward, created circumstances much more favourable to businesses like his own.”

“The Knoydart buy-out”, Jim Hunter pointed out, “is one of more than 40 such purchases assisted by HIE’s Community Land Unit (CLU) since the unit was established at the request of the incoming Labour government in 1997. The CLU’s efforts were now being boosted by the Scottish Land Fund”, Dr Hunter added. Launched in February 2001 and with a budget of UK£10 million, the Land Fund is extending land purchase assistance to rural communities right across Scotland.

“At a time when agriculture and other traditional land uses are in serious difficulty,” the HIE chairman went on, “Scottish Executive ministers are right to be enabling people in the countryside to free up land for new business, new housing, new activity of every kind.”

“Ministers are also right to be promoting enhanced public access to the countryside”, the HIE chairman said. He continued, “We hear a lot about the extent to which our rural way of life is allegedly bound up with blood sports. In the Highlands and Islands at any rate, this is absolute nonsense.”

“The sums injected into the Highlands and Islands economy by sporting estates is completely outweighed by the much larger spending of walkers, climbers, birdwatchers and the like. Environmentally-related tourism of this type is far more important – and benefits lots more people – than deer-stalking or salmon-fishing. That’s why the Executive – despite opposition from some landowning interests – must persist with reforms intended to help people get into the countryside.”

Turning to the criticisms made of land reform by organisations like the recently-launched Crofting Counties Fishing Rights Group, Jim Hunter described the group’s anti-reform stance as *“contemptible.”*

“In places like Norway and Iceland”, the HIE chairman pointed out, “some of Europe’s most renowned salmon rivers have been managed successfully for generations by local communities of exactly the sort the Fishing Rights Group said were incapable of managing salmon rivers in the Highlands and Islands.”

“What was as every bit as offensive as the Fishing Rights Group’s slur on the managerial abilities of rural residents” Dr Hunter continued, “was their contention that such communities could not survive economically without subventions from wealthy landowners living far away.”

“Apologists for sporting estates seem actually to see virtue in rural residents going begging for hand-outs,” the HIE chairman said. “That’s a recipe for endless dependency, hopelessness and despair – a recipe for being always in the shadow of the local big house and its occupants. Thankfully, that way of living has gone now from much of the Highlands and Islands. And nobody with any sense should want it back.”

“Spokesmen for the Fishing Rights Group had described the Scottish Executive’s land reform package as a Mugabe-style land grab”, Jim Hunter went on. “This is to insult the many victims of the violence inflicted on white farmers and their black employees in Zimbabwe,” the HIE chairman said.

“As it happens, there’s little dispute as to the need for land reform in Zimbabwe. The British government, for instance, stands ready to assist financially with such reform as long as it takes place inside a proper legal framework. What’s been inexcusable is the resort in Zimbabwe to what amounts to terrorism.”

“The Scottish Executive’s approach has been entirely – and rightly – different. Here we have had protracted consultation in advance of land reform legislation. Here the legislation in question will ensure that transfers of land, fishings or other assets are in the public interest and that the previous owners of such assets are fully compensated.”

“That is as it should be and the Crofting Counties Fishing Rights Group are as entitled as everyone else to have their voice heard. What they won’t get – and don’t deserve to get – is automatic compliance with their demands. There was a time when the land owning interest habitually went unchallenged in the Highlands and Islands. That time, however, has long gone – and a very good thing too.”

Further Information

For further information on the Scottish Executive's land reform programme visit:

<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/?pageID=131>

And for information on the activities of Highlands and Islands Enterprise visit:

<http://www.hie.co.uk>