

It's Scotland's Soil

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Crann-tara, No 2, Spring 1978

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Why a SNP land policy is necessary

Any political party in Scotland which fails to adopt a clear land policy does not deserve to be taken seriously. Sound land holding and use are the keys to a nation's health. The Scottish National Party (SNP) believes that this country can no longer tolerate private privilege overriding communal interest and has consequently set out a policy to free our most basic resource to allow our land to generate its optimum value to those who live in it and to set up an orderly system to identify various land uses and ensure that the best opportunity is given to the local communities to make use of these priceless resources.

The party's deliberations saw Dr Schumacher's basic tenet as a key concept.

"Study how a society uses its land and you will come to pretty reliable conclusions as to what its future will be."

Consequently control of our land (including lochs, seabed and the continental shelf, etc) must rest with the Scottish people. In order to facilitate this a representative Land Commission sitting at both local and national levels will be needed to supervise the transformation of the present haphazard system into one where there is rural re-population, increased self-sufficiency in agricultural and forestry products and a wide distribution of land holding to encourage intensive, balanced land use (for economic, industrial and recreational purposes) but above all to cut out speculation in land once and for all.

Decades of work but abuses must be tackled quickly

To undertake this task is to embark on decades of work if any smooth transition is to be made. The worst abuses must be tackled quickly but the long term objectives require to be clearly understood. The Land Commission, whose need was agreed by the 1974 SNP Annual Conference at Elgin, has to function at district council level with final arbitration and advice from the national body responsible directly to Parliament. Initially taxation at penal rates will be applied to gross mis-users of land with the alternative and ultimate aim to take such misused land into community control at existing use value. Thereafter land ripe for development and other land would be processed after the best uses for each unit and area had been agreed. To do this a Land Capability Survey and Land Register would be essential tools. Feudal superiors must be abolished with planning controls handled by local planning procedures and various leases at present in force having their conditions standardised to the benefit of all tenants. It is a constant source of wonder that the present system has not ground our economy to a halt.

When land nationalisation was first mooted in the 19th century bureaucrats were thin on the ground and it was possible to personify the wicked landlords. The Highland League could campaign under their favourite slogan "*The people are mightier than a lord*" and see him as an absentee landed aristocrat or some beer baron. In 1978 the hereditary peer or clan chief is less in evidence, though far from extinct, now government department's multi-national corporations and foreign investors often stultify and sterilise even more effectively than a hundred years ago.

Devising a new system will take time

Devising a single new system takes time and through research, the first SNP government will give this high priority, in the meantime the party's Land Policy Committee will pursue the stewardship concept of land holding as the cornerstone to the new structure. There were various compromises adopted to bring about orderly transition, *e.g.* the SNP has not been dogmatic in saying for example all tenants and no owner occupiers, or no compensation. It has said it will penally tax those who do not meet the communities' needs but will seek voluntary transfer or if necessary compulsory purchase at existing use value as the only means of compensation. It has, wisely, built in strong powers to make the local Land Use Commissions 'garages' which should not hold land for more than two years before leasing it to new users or allocating it in family sized farms in units of an economic carrying capacity. In short the SNP considers bureaucratic nationalisation as empty and as useless a dogma as the present day landlord system.

Definition of Land

To meet all the various problems of land holding and use we define land to include water areas already mentioned, plus mineral rights and other claims that the state maintains *e.g.* to sturgeons, etc. which fall under the titles of regalia miaora and minora. By our definition of land we specifically exclude buildings, trees and industrial crops except in one or two very special cases which will emerge, *e.g.* land within the curtilage of a building is deemed to be part of that building as is a reasonable garden ground. The other specific area where buildings are treated along with land is where these are being repossessed from non-Scottish nationals and or corporate bodies by the Land Commission for eventual reallocation to Scottish based

users, be they individuals, cooperatives or other companies. Of course this will not stop non-Scots owning houses and gardens for their own family's use.

Tackling land for development purposes

Three areas of action require detailed reference due to the new procedures the policy institutes. Land ripe for development is tackled in a very complicated and expensive way for local authorities under the British Labour Party's Community Land Act. The SNP seeks to simplify and speed up that very necessary control. Speculation at any point in the country where development seems likely increases the cost to the community quite unnecessarily. It is certainly not just an urban problem but one where every piece of already sterilised land should be used before good agricultural land is even considered. Proper compensation must be regularised. The local Land Commission would advise the governing committee in Edinburgh to acquire certain tracts of land by voluntary negotiation or compulsory purchase, each to be at existing use value as determined by the District Valuer (with appropriate rights of appeal). Future developments must start within two years, meanwhile the Land Commission puts the land to temporary beneficial use till the planned development can be coordinated by the local authority which would pay the price paid by the Land Commission minus any profits from the temporary use or accumulated interest. As agent for the actual development the local authority would lease (as is today the practice for new incoming industries) or be at liberty to sell, in very rare circumstances, in line with the normal planning conditions then decided on. The rent or sale price then accrues to the community to be used for its needs.

Here we see the Land Commission as a skilled purchaser or *temporary garage* for changing land usage which identifies development prospects and sets in motion the procedure to outlaw private transactions in development situations. Any owner desiring to sell land must first offer it to the Land Commission who if they see no need for the community to have it available may allow sale on the open market.

Property limits and other controls

Large land owners seldom work economically or in the community's interest so the SNP's central theme in rural matters is the family sized farm. It is necessary to deal once and for all with non-Scottish nationals, corporate bodies and large individual owners. Firstly, after independence any person who neither is, nor is prepared, to be normally resident in Scotland (and who is not otherwise eligible to vote here) shall not be allowed to purchase, inherit or acquire land in agricultural or forestry use (deemed by the Land Commission to be of such use). Secondly, corporate bodies will be deemed to die every ten years so that the Land Commission, as in the case of foreign nationals, can buy the land at existing use value and redistribute it to existing tenants or reallocate it in units of economic carrying capacity. The large owner of Scottish *domicile* may retain an economic family unit which like others may be, if necessary, in more than one part. Here the Ministry of Farming and Fishing will advise the Land Commission on suitable boundaries for economic agricultural units. Deer forests and grouse moors will, if they are not part of agricultural units be purchased by the Land Commission from landlords at existing use value.

The optimum economic uses of the substantial land so acquired will receive aid from the Agricultural Finance Bank to underwrite measures leading to considerable employment in land reclamation for economic uses. Tenants' rights will be

safeguarded in all such changes subject only to the laws of good husbandry and where environmental safeguards are met, as applied by the local authorities under overall government guidelines.

Functions of the Land Commission at district and central levels

It will be seen that the Land Commission will have both advisory and executive powers mainly carried out at district level. The governing Commission in the capital will consist of 15 representative MPs and 30 elected representatives of various land using interests. They will advise the Scottish Parliament about the best uses to which the land can be put, the final decisions resting with Parliament. In general terms the Ministry of Farming and Fisheries and the Ministry of Environment, who will have joint responsibility, should through a junior Minister, who will act as Chairman of the Land Commission, be able to supervise the transition of our land into a system of holding and use which will soon become non-controversial. Adequate tenancies for new family farms will be assured to those qualified by aptitude and skill to set out on agricultural careers and various land uses properly coordinated to allow new forms of organisation such as cooperatives to be set to work in all the stages of land use. Above all a new decentralised structure of land management will be set up through locally elected Land Commissions with local MPs and Councillors and land users sitting round one table to coordinate the best uses for each area's needs.

Transforming local power relationships and freeing-up investment for productive purposes

I believe that few referrals will have to be made to the governing Commission after a pattern is set and that land management will truly become the province of local people. A system of varied land holding will be allowed to develop without the devious processes that bind it up today. Generations to come will inherit a situation where they will see that there is no advantage in spending huge sums just to own land and that, in future, investment can be directed into productive effort from the outset.

I need hardly say that this policy I have outlined has been dovetailed into other relevant policies, such as crofting, forestry, agriculture, industry and taxation.

The rousing sentiments of land reformers down the years have been cheered to an echo at many a political meeting but when it comes to carrying out the task it's a long term job for any government to undertake. The SNP has armed itself with the kind of detailed proposals which can transform for our benefit the sprawling acres of our discontent.

Further Information

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