

Assynt, Eigg and other local heroes

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Scottish history is made this week as an island is handed over to its inhabitants. But the nation's need for land reform remains urgent.

Local Heroes – Eigg Islanders

This week, within sight of the beach where Bill Forsyth filmed *Local Hero*, and after a five-year struggle that broke new ground in the politics of Scottish landownership, a bunch of Highlanders become owners of the island of Eigg.

But when the whisky has been drunk, and the guests and media have departed, the 65 inhabitants of Eigg will not be dwelling on the past, because the future of community control is a more daunting matter than anything they've had to face in the long campaign to buy their island.

While one landowner was in charge, every islander was in roughly the same position. Now some are directors of the governing [Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust](#); others aren't. With few jobs on offer there wasn't much argument about who got them. Some will benefit directly from plans for development; others won't. While islanders had no control there was no point in planning. Now there are bound to be different ideas about how the island should be managed. Without leases there was very often low rent; in future everyone will have to pay the going rate.

The Eigg islanders are prepared for changes and the tensions they are bound to create. These are the problems of success. But beyond the immediate management issues the long public battle to raise more than UK£1.5 million to buy Eigg has sparked off a wider academic and political debate. Is it right that people can in effect be bought and sold as part of a land transaction? Should one person be able to shape lives as employer, landlord and landowner? Is there a way to prevent private neglect affecting the livelihoods of tenants and crofters – and will millions of pounds of public money have to be spent to put things right?

Local Heroes – Assynt Crofters

This latter question has been bubbling under for most of the decade since, in 1992, the Assynt crofters became the first group to reverse the tide of Scottish history and buy back land from a landowner. They had no blueprint and little support from the authorities. But they did have an opportunity – an estate already up for sale – and a joker card: the recently established right of crofters to buy out their landowners at 15 times their annual rent. The crofters' threat to perform a mass buyout, if their bid for an outright purchase failed, was a bit of a bluff. But it was enough to deter other

bidders and persuade the Swedish finance company that owned this parcel of Sutherland to sell to the people.

Land purchase will rarely be that straightforward again. Most of the Highland estates are not just full of crofters, but have a substantial number of owners and tenants as well. So the mass buyout threat will generally be an empty one. And that's why Eigg has been such an important model of change. Crofters, tenants, a few homeowners and those technically homeless, living in caravans – with different levels of security and legal protection – together managed to see off other bidders without and buyout jokers up their sleeves. Now they face the same challenge: how to run commercially, an island that up to now they have been able to share only socially.

Eigg makes another piece of history, because islanders opted to share their new-found control with other agencies that supported the buyout bid: The Highland Council and the Scottish Wildlife Trust. But can local authority and conservation resources gallop to the rescue every time a Highland community decides it has had enough of the lottery of private ownership? The Highland Council's head of policy, Nick Reiter, says not.

“I think it's quite reasonable for someone living in a city slum to look at Eigg and say, ‘why doesn't someone help me buy my house? Why should Highlanders get public handouts just because they had bad landlords?’ In fact very little public money went into Eigg, and anyway there was absolutely no alternative in the time span we were given. But in the future, the transfer of control will have to be done differently.”

The Big Land Questions

Which leaves two big questions. Is land use perhaps more important than land ownership? And if community buyouts are to continue, who should fund them? Certainly to place controls on existing landowners is cheaper, quicker and less politically charged than a transfer of ownership.

The advocates of tighter control on land use believe any form of compulsory purchase will be politically unacceptable to a new government still making its mind up about how best to control the hereditary land-based power of the Lords. And they point to Scandinavian countries, where controls have been made to work.

But landownership is too firmly on the agenda now to slip off just because it might be politically awkward. And that is not just because of Eigg. The previous Secretary of State for Scotland, Michael Forsyth, amazed everyone when he backed the islanders' case and offered to transfer government-owned land to its inhabitants. The man credited with effecting this transformation is the writer and historian Jim Hunter. He argued with Forsyth that Tory philosophy, which extols the moral benefits of ownership, had never been applied to the most basic asset, land. 7 percent of the people own 84 percent of the Highlands – in effect a massive monopoly, and a vote-loser. Eventually Forsyth agreed.

Land Solutions

Hunter is drafting a paper [Progressing Community Ownership & Promoting New Types of Rural Settlements](#) for the July meeting of the Highland Convention a forum of the great and good set up by Forsyth, which has been given a new, albeit probably temporary, lease of life, by the Scottish Secretary, Donald Dewar.

“I regret the loss of Michael Forsyth,” Hunter says. “He was probably the only man in Scottish politics who could understand the full force of land reform – the problems and the possibilities. It seems to me Labour are in danger of confusing two distinct problems: feudal land rights – which were abolished in England 600 years ago, and the system of large estates owned by a tiny number of often absentee landlords. The first problem can be sorted out by a relatively straightforward change in the law. The second is altogether more difficult. I believe Labour are genuinely committed to reform. But some parts of the Party may have a resistance to the notion that public landowners can be bad landowners, too.”

So what’s the solution? Last year Hunter inflamed the landowning community in a [McEwen Lecture](#) that suggested all crofting land could be transferred to community control for around UK£1 million roughly the price of a mile of motorway. His argument was that all crofters wanting control of their estates should be able to force a sale by offering landowners a sum equivalent to 15 times the annual rent, in effect exercising as a group the same buyout rights possessed by individuals.

But outside the crofting areas the idea of a Land Bank seems to be gathering pace. As Jim Hunter points out, such a bank was set up earlier this century in Ireland by the British government, when the Irish Land Commission bought estates, transferred ownership to local people and gave them 50-years to repay the debt. *“It’ll be tough for disempowered people to consider taking on such awesome-sounding debts, but once a few have set the example, it will be the norm.”* (see [Glendale estate, Isle of Skye](#))

The Highland Council is already planning to set up *one-stop advice shops* across the Highlands, offering access to local enterprise officials, sympathetic estate managers and landowners, experts on accessing European grants, marine resources, forestry, development and so on.

So far one Council – with some of the poorest inhabitants, the largest land mass and the lowest potential for development – has made all the running on land reform. New Labour has committed itself in its manifesto to a review of Scottish landownership, but it looks increasingly as though this will be left for a Scottish Parliament to debate and deliver. In which case dissatisfied Highland communities will simply have to hope that the local heroes on Eigg have damaged the market for island playthings so badly, they’ll have no need for a political resolution of the landowning dilemma until the millennium.

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