

Own the Land and Use It

Forget Huntin' and Shootin' – Give Farmers a Chance

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A Pattern for Prosperity

The Scottish Labour Party's [Rural Land Policy](#) says bluntly that the Scottish Assembly should oversee the land and controversially, demands:

- *Redress for the gross inequalities of Scottish land holding through public ownership so that many frustrated farmers, denied their own acres at present, can get access to land;*
- *A Land Register immediately to clarify land deals and, with the dismantling of estates, a development pattern of family farms – independently run with guaranteed security of tenure, but within the framework of the public control of all land;*
- *Fair compensation for those dispossessed (administered by a special board) and new non-bureaucratic mechanisms – local Land Boards to assist development, 100 percent Government development grants, a Highland Land Use Plan, a stronger Countryside Commission, and public control of shooting and fishings.*

The *Introduction* to the policy paper declares: “Scotland’s socialist consciousness has long been rooted in the [Land Question](#) – repeatedly advocating a policy of public ownership to reverse progressive devastation and apply social justice to the access and use of all land. Many are attracted to the Scottish Labour Party (SLP) because of frustration over the Land Question. A century of good intentions and years of Labour government have not brought meaningful results.”

The philosophical approach of the SLP's *Rural Land Policy* is encapsulated in two points:

1. *To return the land to its people with access and control accorded to those who live by it; and*
2. *To ensure the most effective use of land which, in hill farming areas at least, requires a revolution in land use.*

The *Rural Land Policy* employs four headings to summarise the problems facing Scotland's agriculture:

- *Efficiency;*
- *Social Justice;*
- *Development; and*
- *Democracy*

The solutions proposed involve issues of:

- *Public Ownership;*
- *Compensation;*
- *the Management of Public Land;*
- *Capital Provision;*
- *Land Use Planning;*
- *Crofting;*
- *Leisure; and*
- *Shootings and Inland Fishings.*

The efficiency of Lowland agriculture, the Paper immediately concedes is impressive as presently organised although it can be criticised. The problem lies in the Highlands' huge estates, absentee landlords, and non-economic management criteria. Sporting estates can be commercially profitable but, with capital invested, would almost always produce and employ more.

Social justice demands redress of the gross inequalities of land holding – land is now an investor's commodity. Working farmers who are landowners possess a capital asset disproportionate to their earnings. Prospective farmers without wealth have little chance of breaking-in, estates seldom leasing farms to new tenants.

End Speculation

A desperate need exists to introduce measures to give professional farmers access to land of their own – and simultaneously to end secret land speculations. Land ownership remains the most significant vehicle of class formation in Scotland whose pattern of land tenure is elitist.

Land development and a revolution in Scottish land use will stimulate rural re-population and redress the imbalance which, still increasing between rural and industrial Scotland, is a potentially destructive force within society. This necessary

revolution in land use depends in turn on changing the system of land tenure and providing an intelligent mixture of use patterns – promoted by a body which itself does not necessarily control any land.

Public democratic procedures are the only method which can fairly settle competing land use demands. An intolerably small number of landowners effectively control most of Scotland's land. But nobody fully knows [who owns Scotland](#). A land register is a necessary prerequisite of public control. The Scottish people can no longer tolerate their land being secretly bargained over with effects beyond their control.

Earlier schemes to promote the public interest have consistently failed, and absentee landlordism is still increasing. Hitherto the ownership of land has not been regarded as a critical factor, that the public interest could be protected through indirect controls – which, however, have no meaningful influence on actual land use.

No Bureaucracies

Present powers for compulsory purchase possess distinct weaknesses. The basic problem remains that of controlling the allocation and use of agricultural and hill areas. Community control of the disposition of rural land demands a system of public ownership. Anything less than that will not achieve socialist objectives yet many complexities must be overcome.

Public ownership does not mean creating a centralised bureaucratic structure in order to nationalise Scottish agriculture and collectivise its farms. Public control (the SLP urges) is desirable for major industries and for primary and capital resources but, in Scottish agriculture, fisheries, distribution and other areas, small businesses have a vital role. A farm is a small business but there must be public responsibility for the economic framework within which farms operate.

Farms should be maintained upon land allocated to farmers according to criteria established under public control and subject to overall land use planning. A pattern of family farms should be developed under an egalitarian system of access to the tenancy, involving the dismantling of estates larger than family and, by democratic mechanisms, allocating the resulting farms to intending farmers.

Variations in the quality of Scottish land preclude attempting to play a *numbers game* to assess ideal acreages. Appropriate unit sizes should be determined in consultation both with professional expertise and local farming community interests – with appeal to the Land Court or similar body. Priority should be given to establishing a network of family units following the break-up and transfer of large estates to public ownership – except for the central *home* farm.

Public ownership would come in two stages:

- 1. By massive and complex estate land transfers, particularly in the Highlands; and***

2. *For all other land, by system of gradual transfer to public control on 99-year lease. All existing owner-occupiers and tenants of single farms to be guaranteed security of tenure under either system.*

Redistributing Wealth

Compensation for dispossession, at full market value, would constitute a huge charge on public funds – bringing land into public ownership is part of the progressive redistribution of wealth. Fair compensation, however, paid in the form of taxable pensions and based on income not land value, should be given to dispossessed owners. Maximum pension payments would be £6,000 for an individual owner (with significant supplements for categories of dependents) and a Rural Land Compensation Board would administer the system.

Public land would not be factored centrally or bureaucratically but so managed as to allow farmers to run their own farms. Scotland would be divided into designated areas (comparable to local authority spheres) each with an elected Land Board representative of farmers, farm workers and local authorities (or other *consumer* interests). The Land Boards would allocate tenancies according to centrally agreed criteria and utilising a points system. Tenancy would normally cover an individual's lifetime and provision should be made for communal tenure.

Capital would be available on security for farm development through the agencies of a specially created Land Bank which would also assist financially in forming voluntary cooperatives for marketing, supply, processing and other secondary or tertiary purposes.

Capital Flow

In the Highlands particularly the break-up of major estates will make it necessary to devise a Highland Land Use Plan, prepared by agricultural experts drawn largely from the public service. Highland agriculture's resuscitation will demand exceptional capital injections via the Ministry of Agriculture (and local Land Boards) which will be able to provide 100 percent of the capital required for effective change in land use. In the Lowlands, where problems are less acute, the formulation of a comparable plan should be deferred until actual need is established.

Private shooting interests must be abolished. Shooting rights should not overrule agricultural priorities, with shootings managed on the basis of letting guns and allocated license (which would ensure more accurate ecological control of game populations). Inland fisheries, publicly controlled, should be managed by professional bailiffs with individual and group licensing available.

Crofting Unique

Crofting agriculture should also come under review of the local Land Boards but with an enhanced method of control, vested in Grazing Committees, for crofting's unique [common grazing system](#). The Crofters Commission, becoming redundant, would re-deploy its expertise to the new land use institutions to be introduced.

Leisure and recreational use of rural areas is increasing – the Countryside Commission should be strengthened to discharge a firm role in conjunction with the proposed land management and planning structures. The interests of such bodies as the Nature Conservancy, Sports Council and Tourist Board should be represented through the Commission – with which they may be amalgamated. The concept of National Parks is opposed on the grounds that this approach tends to “*fossilise*” the land.

Further consideration will be given to associated aspects of Land Policy such as rural housing, the forestry industry – and cooperative ventures, which merit maximum encouragement.

About the Author

Danus Skene is on the Scottish Labour Party’s National Organising Committee and is mainly responsible for the production of the SLP’s second major Policy Discussion Paper, ***Rural Land Policy***. He fought Kinross and West Perthshire for Labour in 1974, resigning his Executive Council seat on Labour’s Scottish Council immediately the SLP formed. His own roots go deep in the land, of which he has direct knowledge at home and abroad.