

Am I a chauvinist paranoid?

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No. Scotland has a land problem

Am I some kind of chauvinist paranoid? It is of some importance to check, because a sensation of indignation seeps through the bones every time I realise that the land before me is foreign owned, and groundless chauvinism is a nasty disease.

Or am I possessed only of the depraved morality of a sub-Marxist Robin Hood? My second realisation is that the same righteous indignation rises in my gullet whoever may be the owner of the acres where I tread. It's just that these days so many of them seem to belong to financial immigrants.

No. Scotland has a land problem. And my emotion is only the cutting edge of thought.

Important land lessons from Africa

It once befell me, while working in East Africa to read widely concerning land tenure in Africa and its relation to problems of social and economic development. These days I often find myself stressing two items of African experience that seem to bear more than passing relevance to Scotland.

First, no country with so inequitable a land distribution as Scotland would ever receive a jot or tittle of overseas aid in the rural sector. Second, any country with such a land distribution and with much of the land ownership in alien hands would, anywhere but Scotland, be facing a revolutionary phase.

Why should what is unacceptable in Rhodesia or imperial Ethiopia be of no consequence in Ross-shire.

Land is scarce and its distribution inequitable

Land is scarce, in Scotland as elsewhere, and the Scottish Labour Party (SLP) is not alone in suggesting that we are at present squandering a scarce resource. Much of Scotland, notably hill ground, is not being efficiently used. This is linked to the inequity of its distribution, but even if working residents were not more efficient users of land than absentee lairds or insurance companies, one's basic democratic bile should insist on some equality of opportunity for all countrymen.

What really arouses my wrath in surveying so much of the Scottish landscape is an awareness of its misuse, and a conviction that the working Scottish farmer could make a better job of the place, for himself and for the rest of us.

Two schools of thinking on land reform

Scottish socialists and nationalists have long addressed themselves to the problem, producing two types of solution, which I shall pejoratively label the *Stalinist* and the *Romantic*. The *Stalinists* are still to be found clinging to the lonely belief that the British Labour Party (BLP) is capable of being both democratic and socialist in its conduct and policies. Their position, basically, is of land nationalisation, with the acceptance of a nationalised agriculture as a result. (“*You have seen the Forestry Commission! ... Now we bring you ... the AGRICULTURE COMMISSION!!!!*”). This is manifestly unacceptable to all sections of the rural community, and will involve a bureaucracy that would very probably impair efficiency and wilfully obscure the social problems of the countryside.

The *Romantic* tradition emerges in the latest Scottish National Party (SNP) statement on land policy. Its objectives are fundamentally laudable, positing a rural Scotland of family farms in the hands of industrious yeomen, bastions of a classless democracy. Its failing is the denial of a socialist perspective to achieve such an end. Single family owner-occupancy will not come about by wishful thinking, a pinch of jingoism and the odd intervention in the land market by such as the SNP's Land Commission.

Applying democratic socialist solutions to the land problem

SLP Land Policy is not afraid of having libertarian objectives in holding on to a vision not far removed from that of the SNP. We want to free rural Scotland to destiny as a self-sufficient network of communities based upon the independently worked family farm. What distinguishes our position is the recognition of the need for a socialist means to achieve this end and the need for an on-going system of public control over land-use and land-allocation that comes within the rubric of democratic socialism.

The land market at present is distorted by considerations of the role of land as an investor's commodity, by the low rate of return on capital produced by agricultural operations in relation to the price of land, and by the *sporting* interest. Equitable distribution of land can only be achieved by the total abolition of a land market in which the working farmer without capital does not stand a chance. In advocating

public ownership of the land, the SLP is not only realising the primeval demand of “*The Land to the People!*”, but is making practically possible the redistribution of land to working farmers. Without public ownership, there will be a land market, and so long as there is a cash market for land, any preferred arrangement of land tenure can take a running jump as a practical possibility.

Public ownership linked to democratic community control

But public ownership does not and must not mean the nationalisation of agriculture. Drumnadrochit is no Dnepropetrovsk! The SLP proposes to follow up the socialist measure of public ownership with the creation of a democratic and community-based system of allocation of tenancies to individual farmers, using Land Boards of local elected representatives of the farming and general communities. Our Rural Land Policy gives details of the scope of these Boards, of the security offered to tenants, of the proposed Land Bank, of the relationship between tenants and land use planning agencies and all the rest of it.

We believe that these proposals restore sight to that curiously extensive blind spot that lies between the *Stalinist* and *Romantic* positions. The Highland radicalism of the old Land League has, we suggest, been explicitly and realistically applied to the present sorry state of our acres.

Distinctive Scottish problems require a Scottish Parliament

The general validity of the SLP’s position in Scottish politics is illustrated most tellingly in this instance of land policy. There are distinctive Scottish problems that require solutions proper to the social condition of Scotland. These solutions have not and will not come from a Westminster Parliament, and so we seek an independent Scottish Parliament. But that Parliament is worthless unless it is attained in the realisation of the socialist dimension of Scotland’s problems – there will be no brave tomorrows after independence without a strong shove towards democratisation of the Scottish economy, including the rural economy. That is socialism, and preparing that shove is the SLP’s role.

And what of my paranoia? I have, truly, nothing against Herr Johannes Hellinga, the Arabs of Balnagown, or even Lord Lovat. I have no regrets at having previously stated in print that the Countess of Sutherland is a thoroughly charming, intelligent and charitable lady. It all comes down to that word ‘*community*’. Internationalism will be, thank goodness, an increasing reality. But it will only be a progressive force so long as each national community joins the enterprise in a state of self-sufficient health. And that can only happen if each local community within our borders is healthy. Social and economic self-sufficiency go together, and the Highlands will never crawl out of the peat-hag without the revitalising influence of an efficient agriculture under securely local control.

May the next snowdrift from which you dig yourself be your very own, not Dutch, Arab or sceptred.