

Deposition to Land Reform Review Group

Long, previous experience of discussing the issues of land tenure and use in Scotland with senior members of the SNP, both in opposition and now in Government, especially in relation to the work, findings and report of the Scottish Land Commission (which was largely ignored) has left me deeply cynical that any positive, effective outcomes, dealing with the core, substantive issues facing land tenure and use in Scotland will be forthcoming from this review. Indeed even the membership composition of the current Review Group may be more indicative of the problem rather than any prospect of a solution. In a triumph of hope over experience however, I will put some key points to the LRRG in this rather truncated last minute input.

First of all, I largely endorse the views of Mr John Digney and Andy Wightman in general, but more especially in relation to what is commonly referred to as Land Value Taxation or, as it would be more correctly termed Land Rental Value Collection. It is extremely difficult to exaggerate the importance of this issue in dealing with all the core problems in terms of land tenure and use, but it goes much further than this and would affect many socio-economic issues that have bedevilled Scotland for centuries. The potential for LRVC is so vast that it renders it almost the status of a political 'Philosophers' Stone' and the 'totality of the entirety of it all' prospect.

Although the LRVC concept has profound, positive implications at the strategic social and national macro-economics level, in the more limited context of this review, it offers the prospect of dealing with the major, core strategic issue of land tenure in Scotland: the intense concentration of private landownership in such a small number of individual/ corporate hands, without expensive and totalitarian state expropriation. This is an issue I have often, in various media fora, termed 'the square miles per landowner situation' as opposed to the analogues with the extensive, participatory social democratic system of land tenure of Fennoscandia('landowners per square mile') that the SNP, both in opposition and in government, made lip service to, but have so far spurned in favour of the status quo or, even worse, the 'tribal-kibbutzist' community buy out model engendered by the failed 2003 land reform package of the previous administration.

Recommendation: The LRRG should advise a full examination of the potential of LRVC through either the Holyrood Parliament or preferably through an independent commission or review group with specific expertise in the field. The brief for this process/ body should examine the maximum options for implementation of LRVC under the current devolution settlement, under 'Devolution Max' and full independence, within or out with the EU.

I have often thought that there is a reticence in the political class in Scotland, in terms of land tenure, not to privatise that which 'needs' to be privatised (by this I mean the extensification of participation in private tenure, away from the present intensive system) and not to nationalise that which 'needs' to be nationalised and by this I mean structures such as 'national' parks and 'national' nature reserves. Scotland's two

national parks are an anachronism in an international context and an oxymoron in concept, function and administration. In almost a decade of discussion with senior SNP Government members with the specific portfolios pertinent to the issue, I have been appalled at the lack of professional understanding of the underlying concepts and issues and even more disappointed with the lack of engagement in and with them, in finding a more positive way forward. I proffered the following options to a previous Environment Minister without reciprocal engagement.

If national parks are going to be an option in Scotland, and I have serious concerns about the need for them per se, let alone the current farcical manifestation of them, then they should be fully constituted as such under national state ownership and administered as such under international analogues of best practise. The fact that Scottish National Parks(SNP) should be owned by the Scottish nation and be managed by a Scottish National Parks **SERVICE** on behalf of the people of Scotland, should need no explanation to the Scottish National Party that is now in Government. No doubt the spectre of cost will be raised, but according to the Government an independent Scotland would be among the 10 richest countries in the world and, on this basis, such a cost based argument is facile.

The farcical manifestation of so-called national parks in Scotland, is through the private land tenure that currently pertains within them is not only an oxymoron, but the present administration and aims present multiple dichotomies of expectation that are irresolvable either in terms of socio-economic development or conservation of the vulnerable semi-natural ecosystems, so highly valued at both national and international level, that they contain. The tragedy of the various housing developments (with sectional vested interests gaining the publicly created LRV) in the Cairngorm ‘national park Caledonian Pinewood, highlights that the old attitude of the Highlands as being a ‘wasteland ripe for development’ rather than a wasted land ready for rehabilitation is not dead and that the political class is still obsessed by, suburbanisation, urbanisation and industrialisation as the route forward even in sensitive upland biomes. This is an attitude that I have observed even within the current membership of the LRRG.

In 2003 I put it to then SNP shadow Environment Minister that an alternative approach should consider the concept of.

National Wildlife Refugia (NWR)

A Sustainable (sensu Brundtland Report) Rural Cultural Landscape (SRCL)

A Sustainable Urban Cultural Landscape (SUCL)

The NWR would be state owned and managed directly by a National Wildlife Service responsible directly to the Holyrood Parliament. Such refugia would exclude sport hunting and fishing, agriculture, commercial forestry, urbanisation and industrialisation (including wind farms, hydro-electric and tourist development) and further offer the potential for ‘re-wilding’ including the restoration of native ecosystems and re-introduction of extinct fauna and flora. There would be no dichotomy of expectation problem inherent in the failing national park structure we have at present.

The National Wildlife Service as well as subsuming the role of SNH and appropriate other quangos would have an advisory/regulatory role in the other two zoned areas.

The SRCL would be the main area where major land tenure changes would occur and where appropriate socio-economic development would pertain within the constraints of planning development regulations, which will almost certainly need to be more rigorous than at present. Let us not underestimate the 'wee councillor mentality' in terms of planning gain and the desire to maximise local fiscal inputs.

The SUCL would, considering post industrial blight, poor building standards (in large part due to LRV not being collected) and social dereliction, present the greatest political, administrative and logistical challenge, but this is the nature of accepting land reform in such areas. The possible benefits are enormous, especially in terms of the health and longevity of the urban population.

In reviewing the potential for the above, especially in terms of a National Wildlife Service and rationalising current quangos within it, I strongly recommend an international component (especially from Fennoscandia, North America and Northern Europe) in the reviewing commission, or other such body, that is sadly lacking in the present LRRG and indeed in previous other bodies that trodden a similar path.

Ron Greer, Blair Atholl, Perthshire 16th January 2013