

# We can transform our countryside. Put forests in the hands of the people

A campaign to stop the government selling our woodlands misses a great chance to revolutionise their ownership



**Andy Wightman**  
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Last week, I received an email from the campaigning group [38 Degrees](#) imploring me to sign a petition to "Save Our [Forests](#)". I studied forestry at university and I love forests. I love the smell of the trees after rain and the lemon scent of Douglas fir needles.

In the early 1990s, I was also an active campaigner in the [Taiga Rescue Network](#), an alliance of NGOs across the northern boreal regions from Siberia to Alaska which was set up partly to counter the hypocrisy of northern governments' demands that countries in the south such as Brazil should stop deforestation in the Amazon. We labelled Canada the "Brazil of the North" due to its rate of temperate rainforest destruction, annoying the hell out of the prime minister.

Forests provide clean air, carbon sinks (ie they absorb carbon dioxide), wildlife habitat, homes and shelter for people, fuel, timber, fruits, nuts, medicines, spiritual healing, recreational opportunities... where to stop? I am a member and co-founder of [Reforesting Scotland](#), a group dedicated to substantial reforestation. All of which is by way of pointing out that I don't need much convincing to save our (or indeed anyone else's) forests. In fact, I have a clear vision of the future.

Right across France and Scandinavia, for example, there are extensive community forests. In France, there are 11,000 forest communes – 30% of all communes in the country – and they own around 3 million hectares of forest which is about 20% of the total forest area of France.

In Scotland, the Forestry Commission runs a [National Forest Land Scheme](#) which enables communities to take over ownership of state forests. Land is now increasingly owned by the people whose lives are most affected by, dependent on and shaped by it. The state is not benign and it can be as oppressive as any rapacious private landowner.

Years ago, I asked a prominent historian of the Highlands and Islands, Dr James Hunter, to write an editorial for a magazine about the future of forestry in Scotland. Contrary to the prevailing orthodoxy of the time, he observed: "The Forestry Commission is to Scottish forestry what collectivisation was to Soviet agriculture." He made a good point. Forest ownership should be spread more widely among communities and individuals.

Instead, in Britain we still have a hugely skewed pattern of landownership where the predominance of large private estates and farms is mirrored in the public sector by large, rather distant and unaccountable bureaucracies with the title deeds held by government ministers.

Across Norway and Sweden, towns and workplaces empty during holidays as people head for the woods. There, in summer, they will pick berries, relax in the sunshine and go swimming in the lake. In winter, they will ski and have long debates in the sauna. But

it's not just playtime. One community wood I visited in Norway last year generated £500,000 in income and supported two sawmills and a high-quality timber house factory.

Imagine a Britain of small-scale forestry, of farm forestry, of small-scale rural businesses, of community forests. This is not a romantic dream – it's the reality in France and Finland – but it is a million miles from the mean-spirited, shallow and nihilistic corporate land grab being hatched in Whitehall. To get there or anywhere near there, however, we can't continue with the status quo.

If these are "our forests", we need to make them so because the only reason they are under threat is precisely because we, the public, unlike our friends in the French forest communes, have no stake whatsoever in their ownership.

Moving in this direction means challenging state power as well as corporate power. This was achieved in France by revolution. Here, we can do it more peacefully, but it does mean we need to think more carefully about whose forests these are, why they need to be saved, from whom and what we would like to see instead.

Which brings me back to the petition and the questions it appeared to pose. I asked myself whose forests I am being asked to save, why they need to be saved and what threats they are facing, but could find no answers, though I was told that the government is planning a massive sell-off of "our national forests" and that they "could be auctioned and fenced off, run down, logged or turned into golf courses and holiday villages". Yikes, better sign the petition! But then I remembered my questions.

First, "our forests" relate only to the forests in England. I live in Scotland and haven't been into an English forest for a long time, though the last time I was in the New Forest I was enchanted and such places are clearly worth saving.

Then there's the fact that these forests are not "our" forests. Moreover, they don't even belong to the Forestry Commission (FC). All land managed by the FC in Great Britain (Northern Ireland has its own separate Forest Service) is owned by government ministers; in England, that means secretary of state Caroline Spelman.

So what then is the threat? Spelman stated in October that she was proposing to include powers in the Public Bodies Bill to "enable" ministers to modernise forestry legislation. The government then announced that it was looking to sell around 15% of the forestry estate but the really worrying announcement was made by minister of state Jim Paice on 24 November before a House of Lords committee when he stated that the government wished to proceed with "very substantial disposal of public forest estate [sic], which could go to the extent of it all".

Cue the public outcry and rightly so. (I just wish 38 Degrees had explained all this so I didn't need to do all this digging around.) But is the outcry focused on the right target? Clearly, there is (and has long been) opposition to the sell-off of public forests. Even Mrs Thatcher only managed a limited disposal though she too wanted to flog the lot.

Ministers are clearly seeking powers to get round the legal obstacles placed in their way by existing forestry legislation which would limit any disposal to the 15% mentioned earlier. There are other obstacles. Much of the English forest estate (the Forest of Dean, for example) was transferred to the FC by the Crown which would be entitled to compensation if land were sold. But if the Public Bodies Bill is passed, ministers will have a free hand to drive through their unsavoury proposals.

So there is something far more fundamental about this debate. Ownership by ministers is a precarious arrangement for any land which people regard (rightly) as public. It means that sell-offs are always possible even without the enabling powers being sought under the new bill.

If citizens and communities want to follow through the logic of the "these are our

forests" arguments, then why not imagine a different future more along the lines of France or Sweden? Why not real community forestry? Anyone for another petition?

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