

Submission to Land Reform Review Group

11th January 2013

From: Comrie Croft

Comrie Croft is a 230 acre land-holding and eco-tourism business (Comrie Croft Ltd) in Perthshire. The property is owned by the employees, their families and interested members of the local community (numbering more than 50 in total), after an employee-led buy-out in 2008. To achieve this the group borrowed the majority of the property purchase price and are working extremely hard to pay off these debts over a 20 year period. It has been said that Comrie Croft straddles the gap in understanding between the 'traditional land-owning fraternity' (we are members of Scottish Land and Estates though we don't necessarily agree with all their views on land reform) and alternative forms of ownership such as community ownership. We work hard to ensure that what we do has maximum positive benefit for the local economy and community. We are active partners with local bodies including Comrie Development Trust (eco tourism at Cultbraggan Camp) and Breadalbane Tourism Cooperative (The Ring of Breadalbane Explorer bus) among others.

Our experience leads us to believe that land is a special resource that has the potential to unlock the regeneration of rural economies, communities and natural environments. In our case, what was a traditional small mixed farm that was failing to support one household in the early 1990s is now a thriving business generating revenue of £400,000 (and growing), the full time equivalent of 8 employees (all but one are permanent year-round jobs), 2 households living onsite (albeit one is in a static caravan), a planning application in the pipeline to create 4 affordable '21st century crofts', a significant increase in biodiversity and native woodland cover, and a growing network of public walking and mountain bike trails.

We believe the evidence strongly indicates that land could deliver many more private, community and public benefits under a more diverse land-owning system, with a particular emphasis on community ownership. In our area, as elsewhere there are some large estates where we see many examples of land management that is squewed towards the interest of the owner without a great deal of local or wider public benefit. These include:

- 'Sitting' on empty properties (both habitable and those requiring rebuilding), often for years and into the foreseeable future.
- Using all legal means to hinder the development of improved access and/or core paths on their land.
- Leaving houses to go to wrack and ruin so that people will leave the estate.
- Management that is generally quite unimaginative and leaves the local economy to stagnate because the owner has narrow sporting or privacy objectives over thousands of acres.

We agree that the pattern of land ownership, brought about through Scotland's unique history, is holding back sustainable development. We believe that change needs to be radical, but measured so that real change happens over time, while also giving landowners time to adjust to new realities.

The evidence of our experience leads us to support:

- More community ownership and involvement in land management. This should include: an easier process for communities to take ownership of land; flexibility of definition of what

'community ownership' means; and the encouragement of partnerships between private and public landowners and local communities.

- Measures which acted to gradually lower the value of land, even though we ourselves are landowners. It is the high value of land, in our experience, which puts a halt to many potentially beneficial developments, such as affordable housing. Our experience leads us to support the idea of a land value tax along the lines suggested by Andy Wightman among others.

- The easing of planning restrictions for small-scale community based/individual house-building and development, particularly as part of a living, working countryside and especially where people used to live.

- Measures which would restrict the ownership of land by unaccountable trusts and non-resident land-owners.

- Freely and easily accessible information and maps on who owns land.