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THE VOICE OF SCOTTISH POLITICS

Time to end the myth over Great Scots Land Grab

IF someone says the word 'landowner' to you, what comes to mind? Many Scots will conjure up an image of an elderly aristocrat in tweeds, probably English and possibly foreign, living off the hard work of their downtrodden estate workers.

It is a measure of how good a job militant land reform campaigners have done that this is the impression many of us have of Scotland's landowners.

The reality is very different – but that hasn't stopped some people from continuing to push the harmful and divisive misconception that landowners are somehow anti-Scottish parasites.

Why is this important? It matters because Ministers have started looking at land ownership in Scotland once again and are being pressed by Left-leaning activists to go much further than ever before.

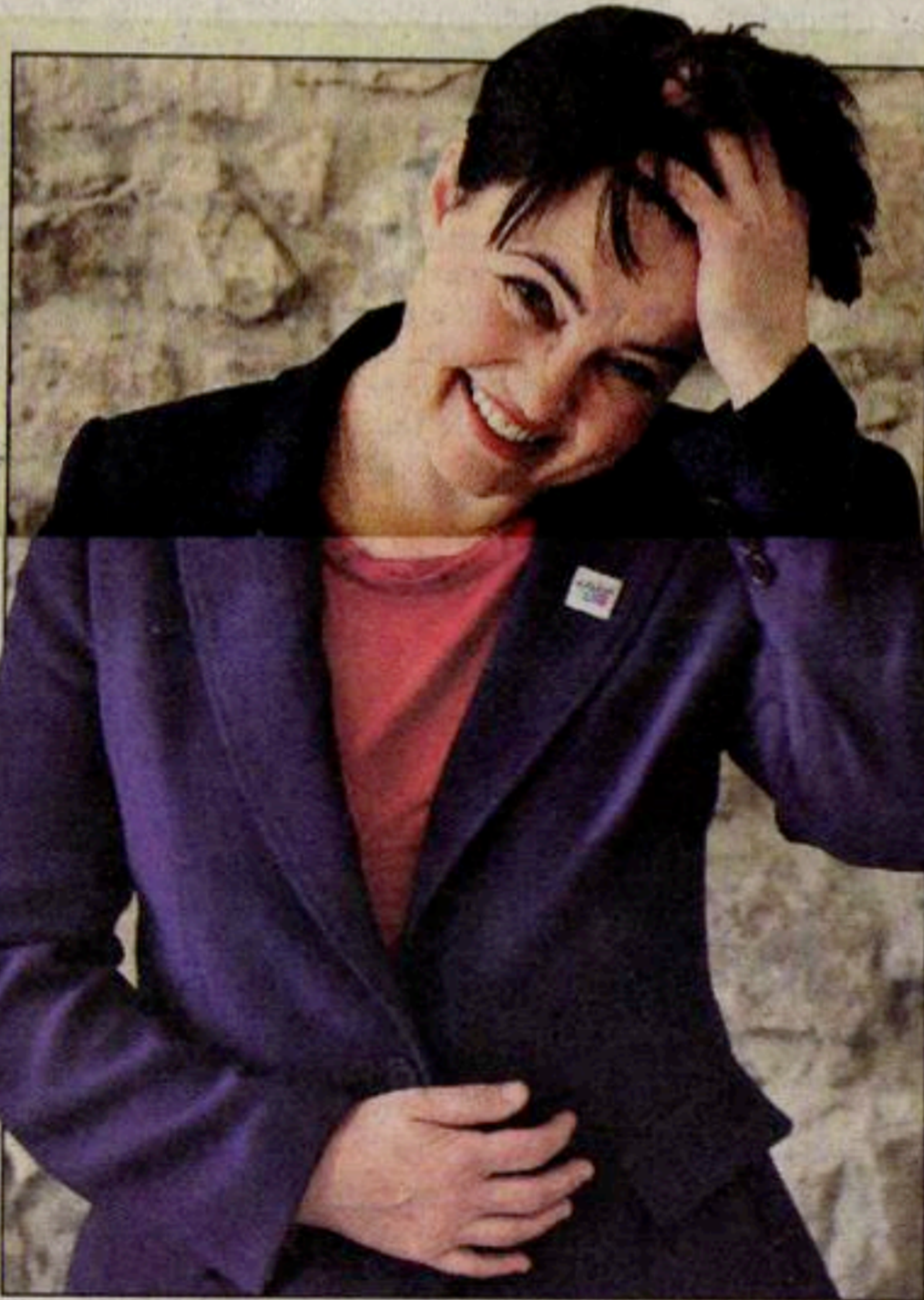
Some want the right to purchase land from landowners forcibly, they want to dismantle the great estates that dominate the Highlands and islands and deprive landowners of income, business and land.

With all these demands, it is hard to avoid feeling some land reform campaigners couldn't care less what happens to the land, they just want it wrested out of the hands of the landowners. That is not only an extraordinarily short-sighted view, but shamefully prejudicial and intolerant as well.

THE problem was summed up perfectly by the National Trust for Scotland in its submission to the Scottish Government's consultation on the issue. It said: 'There is a risk that community right-to-buy can reinforce a simplistic and often divisive narrative that the community is good and the landowner is bad.'

This is at the heart of everything some land reform campaigners believe: not only that communities and landowner are always at odds with one another but that the community is always right and the landowner is always wrong. The truth is that, in most areas, the interests of the community and the landowners are the same.

In most cases, the interests of the landowner and the community dovetail perfectly and it is misleading to suggest otherwise.



DOH!: Ruth Davidson's question backfired spectacularly

Cut! Ruth's big moment raises a few questions...

WHAT is going wrong with Ruth Davidson's political antennae when it comes to First Minister's Questions?

Yet again last week, the Scottish Tory leader went charging in on a topic guaranteed to end in disaster. She railed at Alex Salmond for cutting the budget for the Food Standards Agency by £1 million while the industry is in crisis over horsemeat.

It took only seconds for the First Minister to smash the argument right back at her, pointing out that it was she who had called for Government spending to be slashed across the public sector – to pay for a tax cut.

Nationalist MSPs roared with delight and Tory MSPs shook their heads in frustration – again, in what is becoming an all too frequent occurrence for Miss Davidson.

» *MINISTERS have been known to make grand claims about independence before – but none, surely, has ever gone as far as Humza Yousaf did in the chamber last week. Trying to reassure Unionists who believe separation would send Scotland down the pan, the Minister for External Affairs told MSPs 'the sky would not fall in' and 'the Messiah will not have to postpone the Second Coming'. MSPs from all parties are now hoping for some particularly extravagant biblical promises in the next SNP manifesto.*

There have been examples where communities have bought out tracts of land and islands from landowners and made them work, and work well – often, incidentally, with the support of the former landowners.

But there have been examples where communities have failed to make buyouts work; and others where communities have been offered the chance to buy land and turned it down, realising that local people would not be able to provide the investment needed.

One of the biggest barriers to understanding on this issue comes from the contradictory nature of Scotland itself, as both a heavily urbanised and a largely rural country.

Most people in Scotland live in the Central Belt and, while they may go to the countryside to walk or play golf, they never really come into contact with land-

owners or the people who work in the big rural estates.

They probably have no idea that estates provide 10,000 full-time jobs in Scotland, that country sports bring in £250 million a year to the economy or that the turnover from all estate activities is £1 billion a year.

CERTAINLY, Scotland has some poor landowners. It had even more in the past. Some were absentee landlords who did not seem to give a single stag's dropping for the land they owned.

But there are very few of those left now. The reality is that most landowners in Scotland invest substantial amounts of money in the land just to keep it working and the only reason the land remains viable is because estates have been kept together. Land-

owners are still able to offer fishing, shooting, stalking and walking across the whole of their land, not just on a few bits and pieces that remain after the lucrative parcels have been bought up by others – and that is what makes the land attractive to visitors.

It is also true that some landowners are making substantial sums from wind turbines, but often this income is used to fund small business units and develop cottage industries on the estate.

Ten years ago almost to the day, when the Land Reform Act was passed, it was hailed as a once-in-a-century piece of legislation to modernise and reform the way land is managed, owned and accessed in Scotland.

Just because a decade has passed does not mean it needs to be changed.

Yes, there is room to tinker round the edges, to smooth out inconsistencies in terms of access, but there is no need to fix something that is not broken, whatever deluded 'urban' myths might be peddled by those with class-based chips on their shoulders and nothing but ignorance and prejudice on their side.