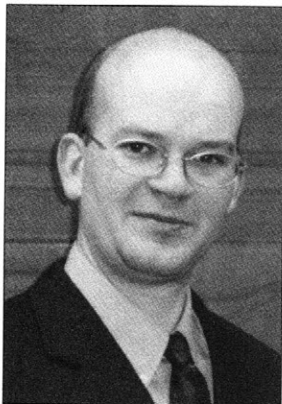


The Big Green Picture

Mark Ballard, Scotland



Mark Ballard is the Convener of the Council of the Scottish Green Party.

He was long the editor of the radical journal *Reforesting Scotland*. The journal – and the membership organisation it is the organ of – uses ecological restoration as a practical tool and a symbol for the social, cultural, environmental and economic regeneration of Scotland.

Ballard studied Economic History at Edinburgh University, and worked as a campaigner for European Youth Forest action based in Amsterdam.

He is also a direct-action environmental activist – recently being prosecuted for attempting to destroy a field trial of GM oilseed rape. He now works as a private environmental communication consultant.

In the context of the current land reform legislation¹ going through the Scottish parliament, this short paper will discuss the wider Green vision of land reform in Scotland.

More specifically it will explore where the Green in Scotland would like to see the legislative process heading. In particular we will look at the Green understanding of the land and its role, at the current state of the land in Scotland and what "land reform" must do to achieve the green vision.

So what do Greens see as the role of the land? The Greens' approach to the land is based on three principles.

Firstly, Greens recognise that the land – the environment in which we all live – is the basis for human life, for our economy and society. Too often in political discourse questions about the land and environment are seen as an add-on, to be discussed after key economic issues have been settled. Greens believe it is essential to recognise the issue of the land as a matter of core political concern.

Secondly, Greens recognise that natural resources, like land, are not infinite, to be exploited freely without consequence. There is only a limited amount of land in Scotland. If we despoil it, pollute it, erode it's soil or destroy it's ecosystem we cannot simply move on to a new bit of virgin land.

This leads us to the third element, which is a logical outcome of the first two. Greens believe it is necessary, individually and collectively, to develop a new relationship with the earth, the environment and the land. In recognising the importance of the environment, and the fact that it is not an endlessly renewable resource, we must move forward culturally, towards a new conservation ethic. This must be based on the careful stewardship of resources, and the holding of them in trust for future generations. We have a moral responsibility towards the environment and the land which must be discharged.

It would seem at present to be clear that we are not living up to that responsibility. Across the planet the human ecological footprint – the amount of the planet's resources that our species uses – has grown steadily over the years, to the point where 24% of all available land is ploughed up or paved over, and a further 26% of land set aside for pasture. Irretrievable ecosystems are being destroyed – such as the great forests of the Siberian Taiga – for short term profit, and without regard to long term sustainability.

Here in Scotland we have already lost our Taiga. Scotland, by nature a largely afforested country, is now left with only 2% of its natural or semi-natural forest cover. Much of upland Scotland has been turned

over to sheep pasture – one of the least efficient uses of land in both economic and ecological terms. Yet Scotland has vast resources for forestry and for renewable energy generation. Scotland has some of the best conditions for wind energy generation in Europe.

In this regard, the Highland Green Party's "Rural Manifesto for the Highlands"² is an inspiring vision for sustainable land use in the Highlands. The document is, if you like, a Bioregional plan for the Highlands, a publication that sets out the "greenprint" for the transformation of the Highlands.

But the problem is not just that land in Scotland is used poorly. Underlying those problems is that of land tenure. We have perhaps the most concentrated system of land ownership in Europe – only three hundred and forty three landowners own over half of the privately-owned rural land of Scotland.

So, one starting point for reform must tackle the issues of land use, the more fundamental issue of land tenure must also be tackled. But to change the way that land is used – perhaps along the lines laid down in the manifesto – we again hit the problem of the concentrated pattern of ownership. The few who own the land can determine largely how it is to be used. So we have to persuade the landlords of the merits of more a sustainable use of the land.

But individual landlords change. Persuading any landlord – or taking the route of the RSPB³ and other charities and becoming a landlord – cannot guarantee better treatment for the whole of the land forever. For Greens, true land reform must go beyond changing the use of the land; of changing the landlord, or of changing their minds. Instead, reform must change the system of landholding, to one that reflects the principles of environmental stewardship. Power over land must be redistributed. We must end the domination of single landlords, and allow many more people to have a share in the responsibility of land use and management, and a share in the benefits.

So how is this to be achieved? The move in the proposed land reform legislation towards enhancing a community's right to buy the land on which they live and work is to be welcomed. However, it is questionable as to whether it will be sufficient uptake of the scheme to achieve the "rapid change in land-ownership patterns" promised in the government's earlier consultation papers. The approach may perhaps provide a solution in the worst cases – Eigg, Knoydart and Assynt⁴ may all have benefited from the proposed legislation. However, to achieve the big Green vision, we need to go beyond dealing with such cases, borne of outrageous circumstances as they

often were, and tackle the deeper questions of sustainable land use in Scotland.

We need a new structure of land tenure, based on environmental stewardship and sustainable development. We must recognise that land cannot be owned outright, but is a common resource, and this must be seen in the context of a web of public and private rights and responsibilities. A key feature of this approach would be the recognition of the need for a proper and effective system of land taxation, as part of a more general switch to taxes on resource use and away from taxation on income. A new system of land tenure in Scotland must include due recognition of the fiscal responsibilities of holders.

To make such a new system work, however, we need to recognise the enormity of the change we have to bring about in peoples' relationship with the land. By comparison, the devising and implementing of improved systems of land tenure will be relatively easy. Greens reject both private landlordism and Stalinist land nationalisation, even if both laird and state claim to be operating in the interests of the wider community. Greens seek to encourage a new kind of community ownership, which gives neither exclusive power to an "owner", nor vests responsibility with an un-elected bureaucracy near or far away.

Do communities wish to take up this responsibility? The evidence from across Scotland – from community woods and community and crofters' buy-outs – seems to be that they do. This is a welcome development, for it is the people of Scotland who must be at the centre of any new structure for land tenure, and who must build the new relationship with, and understanding of, the land.

It is people after all who must be at the centre of the big Green picture.

Notes

- 1 The Land Reform (Scotland) Bill was under consideration at the time of writing.
- 2 Highland Green Party, Rural Manifesto for the Highlands, Duartbeg: 1990.
- 3 The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds – a major UK conservation charity.
- 4 The scenes of recent community land buy-outs in the Scottish highlands.