

LAND REFORM IN SCOTLAND

Memories of the notorious Highland Clearances have resurfaced to haunt Scotland's landowners. Alarmed by heated public demands for land reform, the lairds are now considering the possibility of apologising for the actions of their predecessors - who expelled people from the land that belonged to the clans. **JOHN DIGNEY** reports on the opening shots of a two-year campaign to remedy the injustices that challenge a nation that now embarks on a new phase of political development.

LAND REFORM for Scotland now looks to be a certainty. Robin Callander, the first speaker at a conference in Edinburgh on the subject of reform, noted that it was no longer a question of 'why' but 'what'.

Shortly after New Labour came to power in May 1997, the Scottish Office announced that "Land reform has the potential to be the most radical issue - other than devolution - for Scotland." Within a few weeks of last September's Yes/Yes referendum vote, a Land Reform Policy Group was established, chaired by Lord Sewel, Scottish Office Minister for Agriculture, the Environment and Fisheries. Its findings were published in February in a consultation paper entitled *Identifying the Problems*.

The fact that the Keynote Address at the conference was given by Lord Sewel meant that the proceedings were often dominated by debate on the contents of the paper. The conference was hosted by Edinburgh University's Unit for the Study of Government in Scotland and was attended by over 150 delegates who heard presentations from some of Scotland's best-known speakers on land-related issues.

CAMPAIGNS by remote communities in such places as Assynt and Eigg to escape from the grip of landlordism have earned much public sympathy. At the same time, conservation and outdoor recreation organisations have been increasingly critical of the pattern of rural land use. This rural emphasis

pervades the Scottish Office paper, which begins by stating "Land reform issues related primarily to rural land." The inadequacy of this analysis was addressed by several of the speakers at the conference. Andy Wightman's dissatisfaction with the paper was such that he had restructured his presentation in order to explain his concerns. He attacked the paper for dealing with symptoms, not causes, and for the manipulative nature of some of the 37 specific questions to which the public are invited to respond.

The omissions from the paper probably caused more controversy than the actual contents. The first open discussion period began with a question from the floor as to why the authors had made no reference to land value taxation. This prompted a lively discussion which was joined by Andy Wightman, *Who Owns Scotland*, and by Professor Greg Lloyd. He had spoken of the failure of neo-classical economists to recognize land as a separate factor of production and had referred back to Adam Smith, William Ogilvie, the French Physiocrats and Henry George. He spoke of the need for financial instrument in the planning system, but enigmatically appeared to favour the kind of development charges which Labour had tried in the 1960s and 1970s.

Lord Sewel was not present to hear any of this. Having already addressed the Scottish National Farmers' Union AGM in Aberdeen, he arrived looking jaded and seemed in no mood to hear criticisms of his paper. He retorted that

the previous Government would not even have entertained the notion of land reform. His presentation was general and avoided commitment to any specific policy. When the subject of land value taxation was raised from the floor once again, he showed little interest.

Some support for the Government was given by Dr. James Hunter, who appeared to welcome the diverse approach adopted in the paper, rather than a protracted search for an overarching policy. As an authority on crofting history and legislation, he has fought long and hard for social renewal in the Highlands and Islands and sees the dominance of hunting, shooting and fishing interests as the greatest obstacle to be overcome in achieving the necessary diversification of land use.

A more cautious note was sounded by the final speaker, Reverend Professor Donald McLeod, in an impressive piece of oratory deploring the iniquitous power structure inherent in land monopoly. We cannot be free on another man's land, he argued, and as a Lewisman he pointed to the dilemma on the adjoining island of Harris where a coastal superquarry, proposed by an outsider who acquired the mineral rights, would destroy a mountain but provide respite from local unemployment. "Surrender your land and I will give you jobs" he mocked. He expressed support for land value taxation.

A discussion on the appropriate speed of Government action gave a focus to the final plenary session. Should

they act swiftly to paper over the worst of the cracks or should they continue to probe for a long-term answer? Or adopt a twin-track approach and do both? The next stage in the process is to be a further document *Identifying the Solutions*, due in the summer. Policies will then be shaped to provide the Scottish Parliament with an agenda for action on land reform. If current opinion polls are correct, however, New Labour will not be able to count on the same dominance in the new Parliament as it enjoys at Westminster, with support appearing particularly strong for the Scottish Nationalists.

THIS CONFERENCE showed the depth of understanding within Scotland about the social, economic and environmental damage caused by our system of land tenure. The passion and radicalism of some of the contributions contrasted sharply with the rather mundane one of the Scottish Office document. Whether this gulf can be bridged during the consultation process remains to be seen.

For those of us urging a fiscal approach to land reform, it seemed ironic that ten days later the Chancellor would be presenting his Budget, juggling with his limited options while the huge source of public revenue in land values remained untapped. The fact that land reform is being looked at in isolation by a department with strictly rural remit suggests that the Government is not even contemplating the link between land reform and tax reform. Nevertheless, it was encouraging that three of the six main speakers mentioned land value taxation in their presentations and that the subject was raised from the floor several times by individuals not connected with pro-Georgist organisations such as Land Reform Scotland.

When land value taxation was almost introduced earlier this century, it was Scotland that took the lead, with the attempts thwarted by the Lords and then the Tories. As we approach the millennium, the role of the Lords and the Tories in Scottish affairs seems likely to be greatly diminished. It would be good to see Scotland take the same initiative again.

The Glasgow Connection: a question of strategy

QUESTIONS about tactics for promoting land reform were fired at American social reformer Henry George when he spoke in the City Hall, Glasgow, in 1884.

In a rousing speech called "Scotland and Scotsmen", the author of *Progress & Poverty* was challenged to explain why he was addressing meetings in large cities instead of among farmers and farm labourers. The questioner presumed that the cities, as centres of commerce, had no interest in the land question.

Over a century later, that questioner's assumptions were echoed in the report by the British government's advocacy of land reform for Scotland. Land Reform, emphasised the discussion document issued by the Scottish Office in 1998, should be restricted to issues that were of concern to people in the countryside.

Henry George would have none of that thinking. He replied: "I think it is in the large cities that the evils of land monopoly are best seen, and it is to the large cities that I look for the force that is to reform those evils....The towns must carry the standard of

advancement, as they always do".

The American's influence did, in fact, penetrate the farthest corners of the countryside, but it was in Ireland that he was to witness the greatest upsurge in radicalism among the rural poor. In Britain, it was Glasgow that was to take some of the major initiatives in a tax-led reform to the way in which land was used.

In 1897, over 200 local authorities had sought to reform taxation. They proposed that revenue should be raised from the rent of land alone.

Historian Roy Douglas has recorded how "Scottish site value rating had received the sympathetic attention of the House of Commons. A Bill designed to allow Scottish local authorities to collect their rates on the basis of site values was promoted by the municipal council of Glasgow, and passed its second reading in the House of Commons in June 1905; but, like the parallel English Bill, it did not secure Parliamentary time for further progress. In the 1906 Parliament, more than four-fifths of the Scottish MPs could be regarded as supporters,

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