

Scotland: Quest for a

Red Earl leads highland political 'revolt'

A NEW political party is being formed in the highlands of Scotland in a bid to break away from what is regarded as the factional interests of the established parties.

The Highland and Islands Alliance was created by a small nucleus of activists including John Cromartie, the fifth Earl of Cromartie whose ancestral castle is in the middle of an estate in Ross and Cromarty. His prime interest is in legalising the right to roam the countryside. The lairds of Scotland oppose that demand. They want ramblers' rights of access to be based on voluntary arrangements.

South of the border the Duke of Westminster has joined the attempt to head off the demand for legislation over the right to roam by opening up large tracts of one of his estates in Lancashire to the public. But John Cromartie wants the right framed in law. His passion is mountaineering, which he pursues when he is not running his family's 2,000-acre estate. The family temporarily lost the estate because it sided with the Jacobites, who lost, but they trace their occupation of the estate through five centuries. He is branded as the Red Earl by his fellow lairds for insisting on the legalisation of the right to roam.

Siding with him is TV broadcaster Lesley Riddoch, one of the Alliance leaders who is determined to support people who "solve problems on the ground" to get into the new Parliament in Edinburgh. She does not trust the career politicians who work their way through party hierarchies. "We are also worried that the urban emphasis in Scottish politics may neglect the consequences for the highlands," she told *Land & Liberty*.

The Alliance has been organising consultations in communities throughout the highlands to establish whether people want the new party. Under the new electoral system of proportional representation, the Alliance would expect to secure some representation in Parliament. Says Ms Riddoch:

"The highlands have had all their land and personal assets stripped away, and we want to return those assets to communities. We are most interested in the community buy-out possibilities. We want to empower communities. People have to be motivated to turn their desire for land into finding ways to acquire it. Every community knows it is being shafted by its landowner. But they are disempowered and they end up fighting each other". She is a leading activist in the attempt to turn Eigg and Assynt into a community that owns its land,

which the local residents have had to struggle to achieve without official help.

The official spokesman for the Alliance is land reformer Andy Wightman, who is promoting a radical programme which includes the need to recover the rent of land for local communities.

The Alliance has released a Charter which declares: "Highlanders have had to watch for generations while resources have been stripped away - land, minerals, fishing rights and the biggest asset any community has - its young people. This has to end. Highland people must use their voice...Members of the Scottish Parliament must use all their energies to empower communities, not just themselves".

❖ The counter attack on Scotland's land reformers has begun, with a Dutch millionaire warning that the debate could be "hijacked" by extremists at a time when Europe was "drawing together". Mr. Paul van Vlissingen, owner of the global retailing group SHV, owns one of the biggest sporting estates in Scotland. He has disclosed that he loses £120,000 a year. He is urging other landowners to publicise their accounts to show their commitment to rural areas. In defending foreign ownership, he said: "My main concern is that the debate should not be driven by huge emotion and unrealistic expectations".



■ Lesley Riddoch

WILL THE new Scottish Parliament offer the people a new democracy? Or will the Westminster bear-garden be transported north, ritual hats and warts and all?

Democratic process empowers citizens to select representatives who will contribute to the right governance of the nation. Do the present systems work? Are there better ways?

There are indeed. There must be. From Mary Parker Follett. From Quaker Business Meetings. From Formal Consensus Decision Making. We can learn from experience and change the unacceptable squabbling to constructive discussion.

Steps forward are already in hand. A different electoral system, simpler rituals, procedural changes. But at the beginning of this year, the Scottish Civic Assembly discussed the new parliament, and there was a strong case, from speakers and the floor, for bigger changes. Structure, style and processes were all challenged. A new parliament deserves more than polish on the old ways.

To paraphrase Churchill, Parliament may be awful, but are the alternatives worse? Since he spoke, the century has seen revolutions. In transport, work, attitudes, and, most of all, in communications. These all increase the awareness and power of the citizens. It is surely time to expect real improvements?

Unfortunately, it seems that the changes in Westminster have not kept pace. Rather the reverse. Legislation has proliferated, and become so complex that only specialists can understand it. Debates have become a mockery, with decisions driven by the Whips to satisfy the Cabinet whim. "Question Time" is a joke.

Universal suffrage has been achieved, instant nation-wide - and international - communication is available to everyone, literacy and educational standards have soared. Politically, we have not universal informed influence, but sound-bites and the dictatorship of Cabinet and Prime Minister.

TO AGREE that there are problems is one thing, but to find a solution is quite another. Is there a better model than Westminster? Is there a better process than confrontation between parties? A danger comes from our familiarity with the old: the Scottish Parliament should be Parliament! Another danger is from the fact that the changes are in the hands of the politicians whose whole political philosophy and skills are based on the party system and Parliament. But the greatest danger is that voters have learned to distrust the political system, and they do not expect careful and thoughtful representation.

In the last elections many of us voted for the party which we judged most likely to depose the

new democratic politics

How to Remodel the Political Rules

Bill Agnew appeals for a new mind set

	WESTMINSTER VIEW	PROBLEM SOLVING VIEW
OPENING	A "Proposition" is put forward for debate	A Question is posed for examination
SIDES	At least two, opposing	No "sides", members are all seeking solution
SPEECHES	Alternate, for and against, continuous	Each separate, with time for thought after each
SPEAKERS	Argue to win	Contribute to progress
LISTENERS	Seek weaknesses to attack	Seek understanding, strengths to build upon
MEMBERS AIM	Purpose is to win	Purpose is to find agreed solution
DISAGREEMENT	Almost inevitable to be confronted	Part of process to find consensus
PARTIES	Stress differences	Are external to discussion
TRUST	Distrust high - especially of opponents	Belief in the sincerity of everyone
CHAIR	Holds the ring	Facilitates, clarifies, summarises
PRIORITY	Reach decision	Reach agreement
CONCLUSION	WIN OR LOSE IT'S THE NAME OF THE GAME	SOLUTION FOUND EVERYBODY WINS
RESULTS	Majority wins vote opposition lives to fight another day	Consensus is reached members have a commitment to the solution

last government. This is not a denial of democracy - it is an attempt to get a good result from the system in use. The party system encourages us to vote for "the Party", and "the Party" stands for this, and is opposed to that. (Especially, it is opposed to anything put forward by the other party. To accept an Opposition idea is heretical.)

Such absolute opposition means that arguments are ignored. If your opponent is only seeking to oppose, why listen? The outcome is that Might becomes Right. Confrontation leads to "winners" and "losers", the dominant party enforces its will. The thoughts and values of the "losers" are ignored, and they store up hostility for the future. In the extremes, e.g. the poll tax debacle, the "winner's" decision in Parliament is so remote from the citizens' reality as to be unenforceable.

For 20 years Labour Scotland was ruled by a Conservative government, and suffered the frustrations and fury of being ignored. The party system showed complete denial of representation.

Most newly elected MPs accept their responsibility to the whole electorate, though their "loyalty" to their party line means "disloyalty" to the voters. For it should be remembered that few

voters subscribe to every section of the party's manifesto. The confrontational, communal nature of party manifestos is far from the flexible, constructive needs of good decision-making.

Citizens want a well run country. Good decisions for the country come from finding the best solutions, not from dragooning MPs through lobbies. Still less, from clever manoeuvres and successful sound-bites. To find the best solution needs cooperation and thought.

AMONG the proposals for the Scottish Parliament, it is foreseen that seating should not be in the opposing benches of the Westminster House. Good. Opposition and confrontation need not be encouraged by the seating plan! But the most important change needed is

not in the seats, but in mental set. For members to abandon disputation and join in genuine search for solutions to the great problems that face the whole country, not the desires of the ruling faction.

Is this possible? Could we have such disparate people with such conflicting views all working together for the common good? Yes it is. It is not a simple change, but it is possible to abandon hostility and confrontation and adopt constructive cooperation.

To be a party Member of Parliament is to work within a series of assumptions. These assumptions have a coherence, and to change one is to challenge many. The table sketches this.

Looking for the best solution means just that. It means recognising that "the best solution" is the common aim of all the participants, and that "the best solution" requires the agreement and commitment of all the participants. Listening needs to be directed at finding the constructive elements, at understanding the objections and overcoming them, at supporting the efforts to reach real agreement. The mental shift is complex - but when you look at the "Westminster" assumptions, don't they look silly? □

SCOTLAND'S new Parliament risks being branded as "impotent" if it fails to champion an effective land reform.

This is the assessment of a Scottish historian, Dr. Ewen Cameron, a lecturer at the University of Edinburgh.

Speaking at a conference on Land/Lessness at the Manchester Metropolitan University on November 6, he concluded his analysis by declaring: "Any indication of a failure to confront the difficult questions and vested interests which will have to be faced in reforming the Scottish land laws will quickly lead to a perception that the new Parliament is impotent".

The devolution of power provided the people of Scotland with the opportunity, through Parliament, to assert rights which had formerly been expressed through civil disobedience. These have been numerous in the last two centuries. According to historian Iain Robertson, who analysed popular protests for the Manchester conference, "Claims to land as motivation of protest appear clearly in the written record of the 500-plus incidents of protests that occurred between 1900 and 1939". He noted that the protestors "did not recognise the legitimacy of that law as it was made for and by 'the Laird only'. In taking these actions Highland land raiders believed that they were doing nothing more than reclaiming 'what their ancestors had', what was 'their property'. This belief in familial possession of land appears throughout the oral tradition of particular places and events in the Western Isles".

But Dr. Cameron thought that it was questionable whether the proposals now being advanced by the Labour government could provide Parliament with the policies that would break with the past. "They represent the pursuit of what is least disruptive, the minimum possible reform to retain support and to argue that promises have been fulfilled whilst alienating the fewest".

In his view, it was fitting that the land question should be prominent on the new Parliament's agenda. "Indeed, the land question could help to establish the creden-

tials of the Scottish Parliament". But that opportunity was two-edged, for it demonstrated "the risks which the Parliament could be exposing itself to in taking up the land question, no matter how cautiously".



■ Ewen Cameron