

# Scotsmen seek parity on land rights with the Maoris!

SCOTTISH crofters have launched a legal bid to re-claim their traditional rights to land, writes Peter Poole.

In a letter to British Premier John Major they ask to be recognised as an indigenous people with the same rights as the Maoris of New Zealand and the Aborigines of Australia.

The Scottish Crofters' Union claims that this initiative could lead to reform of land ownership and the transfer of land and mineral rights from estate owners to local communities. This claim has been backed by lawyers at Glasgow University's department of public international law. One of the law experts, Catriona Drew, said the definitions used by the United Nations could be applied to crofters. She says:

"A strong argument can be made that crofters are an indigenous people because their people have always been on the land; they have a distinct culture and, in some places, the distinct Gaelic language.

"Given the experience of other indigenous peoples in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States, this would give the indigenous people of the Highlands and Islands the absolute right to have their land returned and for compensation to be paid for being deprived of their rights".

Under a UN draft declaration, indigenous peoples have the rights of self-determination, control of lands and resources, and cultural integrity.

Dr. Fraser MacLeod, the director of the Union, says that "we cannot continue into the next century under the same system". He cited the Maoris as an example of a people who were given back their land. In the case of the Ngai Tahu tribe, which lost 80% of South Island through crooked deals going back to 1844, the New Zealand government recently agreed to a compensation deal

worth £80m. This was in return for almost 35m acres which were acquired by the British colonial administration for £14,750.

The prospects for retrieving traditional rights to land and life were taken a further step forward with the outcome of the election in New Zealand in October. Under new proportional representation rules, a party led by Winston Peters, who is of Maori and Scottish descent, has promised a return to traditional values. He formed New Zealand First four years ago after being expelled from the Cabinet and the National Party. Peters is seen as a 'wild card' politician who could exercise considerable power during a period of political uncertainty.

LIVING testimony of the cultural

significance of the return of land to the centre of political life is provided by the recent death of a distinguished aboriginal artist in Australia.

Since 1977 two tribes have been re-settled on their traditional lands under the Aboriginal Land Rights Act (1976). A stock woman, Emily Kngwarreye, began to paint and by 1992 she was recognised as one of Australia's foremost contemporary artists. Her paintings evoke the sensuality of the landscape and have contributed to cultural and environmental renewal.

Today, her paintings are exhibited around the world. She died on September 2, but her legacy is a testament to the way in which the retrieval of traditional rights to land can re-awaken long-lost social values and institutions.

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## Nobel economist dies

DR. WILLIAM VICKREY died a few days after being awarded the Nobel prize for economics.

The announcement on October 8 that Dr. Vickrey had been honoured held the prospect of important gains for the Georgist tax-reform movement. For Dr. Vickrey was a learned advocate of the fiscal reform associated with the name of American social reformer Henry George.

Dr. Vickrey, professor emeritus of Columbia University, was to share \$1.12m prize with an English economist, Prof. James Mirrlees of Cambridge University. Tragically, he died of a heart attack a few days after the news was announced.

Dr. Vickrey is most famous for his study of the New York subway fare system in the 1950s. This involved a calculation of how governments could

provide an efficient public service at the same time as covering the capital costs of infrastructural investment.

He concluded that the optimum conditions existed when the rent of land and natural resources were treated as the tax base, to generate sufficient revenue to enable governments to remove taxes on people's wages and savings.

Dr. Vickrey, who was President of the American Economic Association in 1992 summarised his findings in these terms: "Full efficiency thus requires that all such land rents be devoted to the subsidy of these decreasing-cost industries and the appropriation of these rents by landlords for other purposes precludes the achievement of full efficiency."\*

\* William Vickrey, "The City as a Firm", in Martin S. Feldstein and Robert P. Inman, *The Economics of Public Services*, London: MacMillan, 1977, p.334.