

BY FRANK RENNIE

THE intimation this March by Lord Sanderson, Minister for the Highlands and Islands, to the annual conference of the Scottish Crofters Union that the Government was beginning to look actively for ways to enable the transfer of state-owned croft land to the private sector should have come as no surprise to anyone in the Highlands. Recent information, however, confirms that the Scottish Office are making a more speedy progress towards this stated objective than most observers would have expected.

The 1976 Crofting Act granted crofters the right to purchase their crofts, but most tenants have shown a marked reluctance to exercise this option. This has frequently perplexed the Government in what they see as their drive towards self-employment and individual initiative. The Government is anxious to promote increased participation in home and land ownership.

The vast majority of crofters have chosen to have nothing to do with owner-occupancy primarily because it would offer them very little they do not already have. They would be able to own trees which they plant, and to use the croft as security to raise working capital, but they would stand to lose their right to security of tenure and would be means tested on all grant applications for croft improvements.

With this in mind, the compulsory disposal of the Department of Agriculture (DAFS) crofting estates, state-owned croftland that is spread throughout the Highlands and Islands, is an obvious step for the Government in its attempts to persuade crofters to develop the Thatcherite property-owning ideals. In his book *Who Owns Scotland*

## LABOUR LIMITS

SCOTLAND'S Labour Party proposes to set a limit on the amount of land - any block of 5,000 acres or more - over which anyone can automatically expect to exercise sole ownership rights, writes PAUL KNIGHT.

In its document *A Rural Policy for Scotland*, the party also raises the possibility of compulsory leasing of tracts of under-used land, with compulsory purchase as a last resort.

The document is intended as the basis for Labour campaigns in rural communities between now and the General Election.

"The objective is to make available land for farming to allow entry into the industry by many currently excluded because of the high price of land," states the document.

Large landowners would

have to demonstrate that their use of land in blocks of over 5,000 acres was consistent with the "Local Rural Development Plan". Also under threat:

- Absentee landlords, against whom new curbs are proposed.
- Restrictions on weekend farmers.

The party dominates the urban constituencies in Scotland, but its electoral support is weak in the countryside. Conservative supporters have warned Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher that the Government is likely to have a rough ride from voters, with the major gains likely to go to the Scottish National Party.

Labour, which is doing well in the national opinion polls, hopes that its land use policy in Scotland will help it to gain a majority at the next general election.

# Pressures build up on crofts



• Lord Sanderson

SCOTLAND has the greatest concentration of land ownership in Europe. Disputes over land rights have caused turbulent social upheavals that have left their marks on the clans. Now *Land and Liberty* writers describe the new battle: socialists and Conservatives have developed different strategies for sharing out title deeds.

John McEwen calculated that the DAFS owns nearly half a million acres of land in Scotland, much of it under crofting tenure.

The Department manages these estates on behalf of the Secretary of State for Scotland as a result of extensive land purchases made by the Congested Districts Board, and later the Board of Agriculture, in the last decades of the 1800s and the first part of this century.

They were a direct attempt by central government to stem the social unrest spreading throughout the Highlands by taking over some small estates and sheep farms created during the clearances and redistributing them among the landless population still huddled together in the adjacent, overcrowded, crofting townships.

On several occasions, crofters themselves have suggested that the ownership of the DAFS crofting estates might be better transferred to the resident communities, who would manage these areas collectively and ensure that the resources of the estates were best used to benefit local people.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth of comparable models to enable correlation of costs and benefits, but a system similar to that which is operated by the Stornoway Trust, a 65,000-acre estate on the Isle of Lewis, has often been proposed.

Under this system the rights of crofters as tenants would be unchanged, while allowing them to share ownership of the estate collectively and elect a committee of trustees to manage its affairs. The Stornoway Trust has existed for over 60 years since the land was presented as a gift to the residents of the Stornoway Parish by the previous owner, Lord Leverhulpe. He retired from the islands with his dreams of creating an industrial base in Lewis and Harris frustrated by the islanders' demands for access to the land.

THOUGH the road is fraught with difficulties, Lord Sanderson desperately wants to rid the Scottish Office of over 1,000 crofts. He is reported as having come round to the view that some form of Community Land Trust for crofters may be a good thing.

The increasing pressures on farmers to reduce surplus production and to diversify their incomes more on the manner of the occupational pluralism in the crofting communities makes it all the

## CONTROLLED INJUSTICE

DONALD Trump, who made his billions out of New York real estate, claims that rent control "stopped protecting the people who needed it the most" - and cites some examples in his autobiography:

- Actress Mia Farrow has 10 rooms overlooking Central Park. She pays about \$2,000 a month for an apartment that might rent for upward of \$10,000 on the open market.

- Singer Carly Simon, lives in the same building and pays

\$2,200 a month for her 10 rooms.

- BBC broadcaster Alistair Cooke pays \$1,100 for an 8-room Fifth Avenue apartment.

- New York's Mayor, Ed Koch, has "a very nice three-room rent-controlled apartment with a terrace in a beautiful part of Greenwich Village" for which he pays \$350 a month - perhaps one-fifth of what it's worth, claims Trump.

\* *Trump: the Art of the Deal*, London: Arrow, 1988, pp.168-169.



• Mia Farrow

## Move for 'George' reforms

ARGENTINA: The Bishop of Viedma, capital of the Rio Negro province, has called for social justice based on the introduction of an economic programme of reforms of the kind proposed by American reformer Henry George.

Said Monsignor Miguel

Esteban Hesayne: "The land is a gift of God and it is not moral to use it so that its benefits [economic rent] fall upon few people, leaving others - the great majority - excluded."

Known as "the Father Bishop", Hesayne is a leader of the progressive wing of the

Catholic Church in Argentina. His contact with Georgist economics was through Juan Carlos Zuccotti, a graduate of the Henry George School of New York.

SOUTH AFRICA: Cape Town City Council is to re-evaluate its property tax, which some people believe to be inefficient, expensive and a "turn-off" to developers.

A new councillor, Mrs Patricia Sulcas, called for an urgent investigation into the attractions of a tax that fell exclusively on site values. She argued that site value rating was the simplest, most efficient and equitable basis of property taxation.

Added Mrs Sulcas: "If land is more heavily taxed, it will not stop speculation but it will become more expensive to hold land."

FINLAND: Plans for Helsinki's new property tax have become law, and come into effect this year. Prof. Pekka Virtanen reports that *Land and Liberty* was inaccurate in stating that the 10% tax rate on the taxable value of land zoned for multi-family residential dwellings diminishes to 5% in subsequent years.

"In fact," writes Prof. Virtanen, "the first year's rate of 10% increases by 5% in each subsequent year until it is 50% of the taxable values."

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ticipate in what could be an ambitious new phase of crofting because of their (albeit justified) deeply rooted suspicions of Highland landowners and their hidden motives.

Morally, DAFS cannot easily relinquish their responsibilities to their present tenants. It would seem reasonable that they should be directed to devote substantial help, in financial and administrative backup, in order to safeguard the legal interests of the crofters. Any changes to the status quo will take some time to become established and the Scottish Office must realise this.

Some pragmatists are already saying that if the Scottish Office are determined to privatise the DAFS estates then it is up to crofters and the Scottish Crofters Union to take the initiative in proposing a scheme which will limit the potential damage and safeguard the wider interests of crofting.

The recent history of the Thatcher Government indicates that there is little point in ignoring the issue in the hope that it may go away, for it now seems certain that some new venture will shortly emerge from the Scottish Office. Local discussion has already begun among crofters in an attempt to contemplate the proposed changes, to consider the range of alternative options and to ensure adequate presentation of their case if and when the situation should arise.

**The worst scenario of all would be for the crofting communities at the receiving end to have no constructive answer at all when Lord Sanderson makes his next move.**