



SCOTTISH LAND FESTIVAL 2015

INFORMATION PACK

Our Land – Scottish Land Festival 2015

Our Land is an initiative created by Common Weal, Women for Independence, Scottish Land Action Movement, Radical Independence, land reform campaigners Andy Wightman and Lesley Riddoch. Administrative help has been volunteered by Laura-May Kennedy of Common Weal Angus.

“Our Land aims to highlight the problems of dereliction in cities and emptiness in the countryside that flow from an elitist system of land ownership that allows a handful of individuals, quangos, insurance companies and trusts based in offshore tax havens to dictate the price, availability and use of land in Scotland – from the remotest islands to the busiest city centres. We will have actions and events across Scotland in the last two weeks of August to illustrate the social problems that stem from land shortage and to showcase the benefits of more diverse ownership and more community control.” Lesley Riddoch

Why Land Reform Matters

The quasi feudal way land is owned in Scotland affects rural and urban communities. 50% of private land is owned by 432 people, from large sporting estates to empty buildings and derelict land in our towns and cities. It affects everyday lives by pushing up the cost of housing -- 40-50% of new build costs are the cost of land. That is very different in most other European nations.

The inability to buy means long term residents are turned into short term tenants with very little security or ability to plan or improve their homes -- in urban and rural areas. In large parts of the Scottish countryside locals know they will never, ever be able to buy land for a business, community development, affordable housing for their own children or modest weekend hut. Yet the owners of these sporting estate don't currently even pay business rates. In cities, the high cost of land – because of its scarcity -- encourages dereliction and land or buildings kept vacant for years or decades as a kind of 'land bank.' All of this damages Scotland's claims to social fairness because we are one of the few countries on earth without a fair and progressive form of land taxation and no transparency of ownership.

Currently only 26% of land is registered and many landowners are based outside of Scotland for tax avoidance purposes. A land reform bill is being introduced to Holyrood this summer but it's very modest provisions have already been dismissed as “a Mugabe style land raid” by representatives of Scotland's large landowners. Political consensus tends to accommodate the noisiest interests – so we think it's time supporters of land reform made their voices heard and pinpointed some of the biggest problems arising from such a tiny concentration of landowners (private and public) as well as some of the successes of alternative ownership patterns.

The Campaign

- Activities will run for the last two weeks in August, with the bulk taking place over the weekend of 29/30th August.
 - Events will be held across Scotland – cities and countryside, mainland and islands, on land and beside rivers.
 - We'd like your help to post 1000 Our Land signs across Scotland – beside empty land or vacant buildings the wider community needs to use. Signs will be available for you to erect or (legally) attach and we'd encourage you to take selfies/group photos by your chosen places and post them on Twitter using the hashtag #OurLand or post on the Our Land Facebook page <https://www.facebook.com/groups/999295353466699/> from the "Glorious Twelfth" (August 12th) onwards. Take as many as you can.
 - We would also love to hear the story of why you have chosen a particular building or piece of land. A bit of research may be necessary and Andy Wightman's website www.whoownsscotland.org.uk is a useful tool. You can subscribe to this site for £5 per month or £10 for a year. There will be a discount code available for the unwaged. But for everyone else it is a great way to support Andy who has been a long time campaigner for land reform in Scotland.
- To give you some ideas here is a list of events that are already being proposed
- Gathering/festival at Abriachan
 - Paddle protest by sea kayakers
 - Walk to the deserted township of Grulin, Trotternish, Skye.
 - Flash mob and bike ride on an estate in Duns
 - Mass picnic on disputed/derelict land in Angus.
 - A salmon or brown trout fish has been discussed because most of our great rivers are timeshared into the next century and inaccessible to local people. Some folk want to test the authorities' appetite for arresting folk who want to demonstrate how exclusive the ownership of rivers has become. Folk may get arrested or the whole action might shame the police and landowners into letting folk fish.
 - Members of all political parties are welcome as Our Land supporters – but we didn't want the campaign to be organised by any single political party. This is a grassroots campaign deploying networks established during the indyref to reach out to Labour and Lib Dem supporters of land reform. We are a group of volunteers, so please help us keep the workload manageable by sending updates to Laura-May.

Contacts –

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Land Reform

The thing about justice is that it's seldom just about justice. This couldn't be more true than of the need for land justice in Scotland. We all know the case about why land reform is a matter of fairness and a sense of the right thing being done. We have a land ownership profile which fails any test of being right or fair – a concentration of wealthy people owning the nation's land which isn't seen anywhere else in the developed world. And a history of that land being appropriated via means which feel like the opposite of fair – violence, clearance, human misery and all.

More recently we have a new form of unjust land ownership; not lords using violence to increase their personal property but investors, corporations and speculators using land for virtually any purpose other than productive use. Through so-called 'land banking' and speculative trade, the ground that forms the land mass of Scotland is becoming not something on which to grow or build but to hold as a dead asset, hoping it can be resold for a price higher than was paid for it.

The harm this attitude to land has done to community, society and economy is the flip side of the injustice. In rural Scotland (and in particular the rural north), communities can't get access to the land which would enable them to develop and strengthen their communities, whether through the development of land-based industries or creating more housing to keep communities viable. Around our cities there are 'land-banked' chunks of our country which are being held by large corporations which may have little or no interest in developing it unless speculative goals can be met. The need to provide houses for people, space for development, land for productive use – none of that fits into a speculative model of land ownership.

The ideas that land is 'just there', that in the modern world land-based industries is a sort of historical curiosity, that housing is primarily a means of releasing the value of land, that land reform is just about crofters – these wrong-headed ideas are a curse on Scotland. They blind us to the social and economic potential of bringing land into productive use.

If you shake off these ideas you can start to see the real potential we have. Why couldn't Scotland have developed the kind of advance timber industry of the Nordic countries? Why couldn't Scotland now create a large-scale biomass industry to create green heating? In conjunction with a better food policy, how much more farming and food production could we make viable? The New Towns policy transformed Scotland in the post-war years; given new technology which makes dispersed living more realistic, what about a 'new villages' policy for our era? Around our towns we could create new housing in properly designed communities (not the 'knock-em-up-fast' estates that offer three bedroom detached villas for high prices yet offer no community, no economy, no beauty). In towns and cities we could see a flourishing of reuse of land and buildings based not on fastest-possible-release-of-equity but on social benefit, on real economic development (no, another shopping mall doesn't count), on creating spaces generations to come will thank us for.

I have come to believe that the biggest barrier to real land reform (not just policy but the revitalisation of our relationship to land and the social and economic benefits it can bring to us) is our imagination. If we can't imagine what we'd do with land, it is unsurprising that we sort of shrug and leave acre after acre of virtual barren wilderness to the grouse shooters and City speculators. Think – what would you do with a bit of land, or what would you do for your community with a bit of land, or what business can you imagine creating if you could get land?

The Scottish Government legislation is a start. The bigger problem is probably the valuation of land, costing as it does much more than its economic use value because of speculation. If land is overpriced then any enterprise you want to create on it and from it will be less viable or entirely unviable. I think we need a Land Value Tax to readjust the value of land and bring it closer to its use value. I think we need to take a serious look at planning and what it is for – is it mainly to create short-term profit or to create long-term sustainable social and economic benefit? More contentiously, I think we need to consider new forms of land ownership (including mutual, cooperative and community ownership and some nationalised land for national use) and that this should be linked to a more active use of compulsory purchase. Only in this way do I believe that we can use land for the benefit of all and not the market's way of allocating it to whomever can make the most immediate profit.

There is so much we can do, so much that we could change. Scotland could be a growing, making, building, doing and living country, not just a shopping, drinking, working, sleeping one. But we'll never be that if we view the land on which we stand as something alien to us, something owned by someone who wants us to stay away. I'm tired of the endless braying sound of the super-privileged complaining that any form of justice for the people of a nation is a 'Mugabe-style land grab'. The only land grab I can see is the colonisation of the land of our imagination, a land in which Scotland could rebuild itself using its soil and its space as a resource for a better life for its people and a better world for us all.

I don't only want the lairds to share out the land they control, I want them to allow us all to imagine that better Scotland without the use of their lobbying budgets to fool us into thinking that we have no option but to do as we're told (which, as always with the rich, involves giving them precisely the subsidies they despise so much when they're being paid to anyone less fortunate than themselves).

Lives are built on land. Nations are made up of land. Why is Scotland so different? When will we wake up and change it? Well, with the Our Land festival you have the perfect chance. Imagine a different future – and build it for a day. If we can catch enough imaginations we may be able to build it for good.

Robin McAlpine is Director of Common Weal

Don't Forget The Urban Perspective

Urban Renewal

If you think about it, the urban environment is characterised by continuous change:

- Old industries decline and new ones develop
- Existing land and buildings are adapted for new uses
- Empty and vacant property is brought back into use

So successful urban areas, depend on both the effectiveness and efficiency of land recycling – and that in turn underpins prosperity

The problem is that left to their own devices, urban land markets are notoriously inefficient.

Urban Land: The Problems

So what are some of the urban land problems and issues?

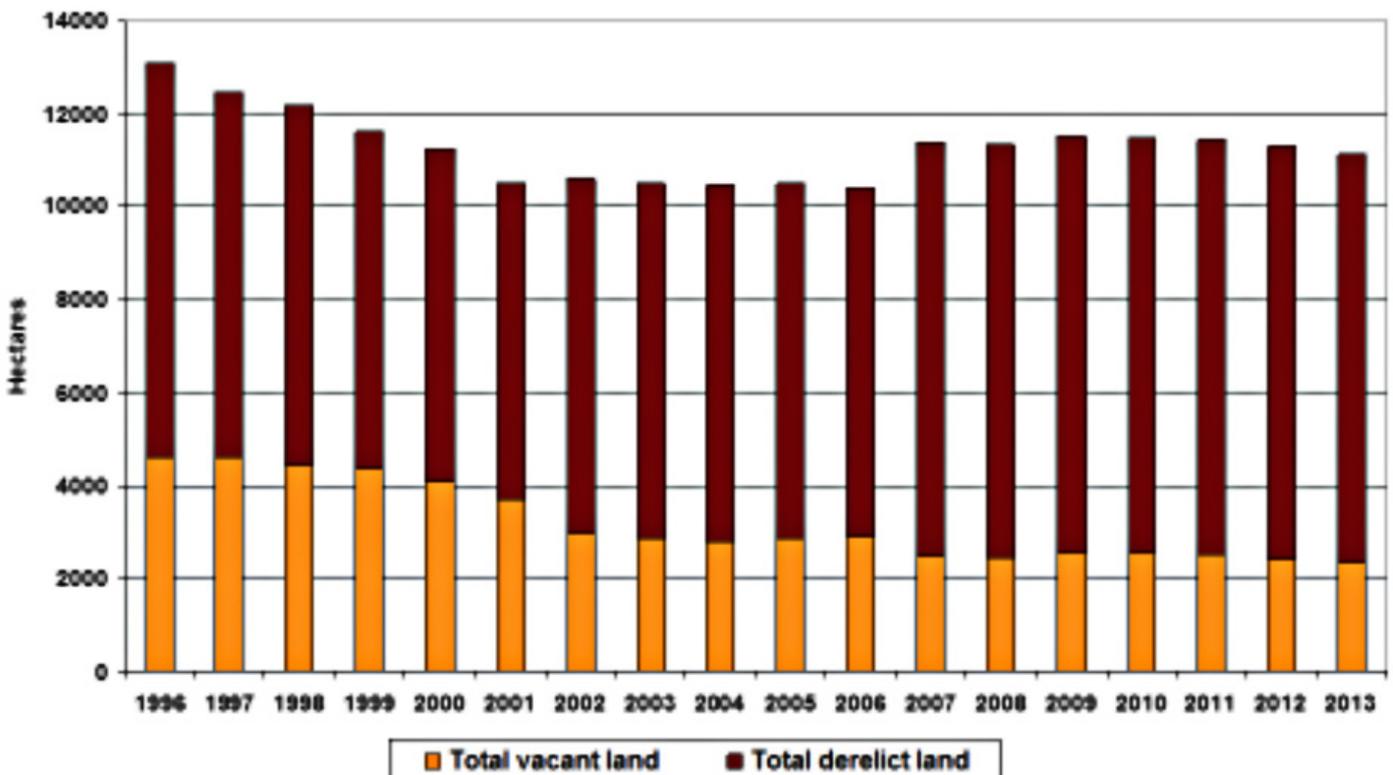
- Extensive areas of vacant & derelict land - blight many urban communities
- Urban Land prices kept artificially high by valuation methods and other factors
- Some owners being unduly obstructive in relation to new projects
- Urban redevelopment projects can take a long time, & are often abandoned
- Age of austerity - means we can't just throw public funding at these problems

Vacant & Derelict Land

I would suggest that a key test for land reform, will be whether it helps reduce Scotland's record of long term vacancy and dereliction.

This graph shows the extent of both vacant and derelict land over a period of time. The problem is not just the levels of vacant and derelict land, but the persistence of the problem over a number of years (despite considerable efforts by both the Scottish Government and local authorities)

Vacant & Derelict Land in Scotland 1996 - 2013

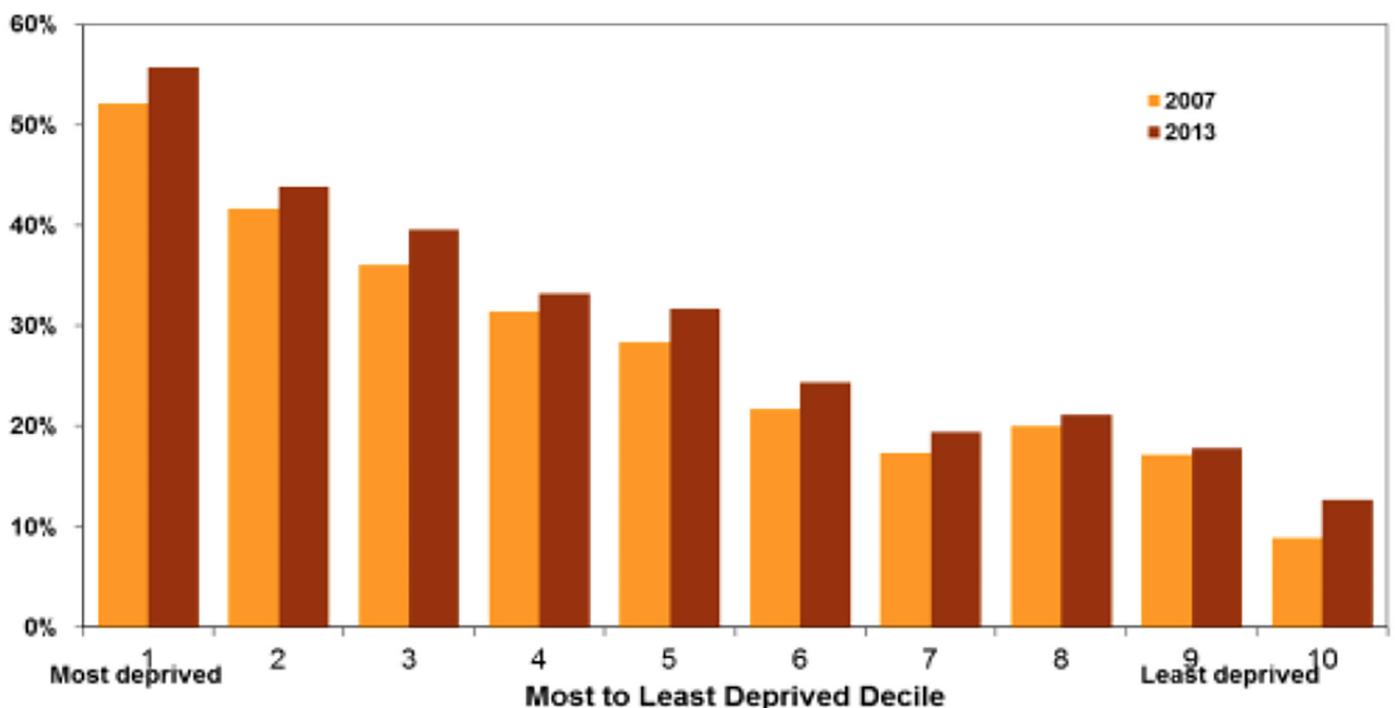


Vacancy and Disadvantage

This graph shows the strong correlation which exists between, the location of vacant and derelict sites, and the location of our most disadvantaged communities. The Scottish Government has an increasingly strong social justice agenda, and this graph demonstrates that addressing land vacancy and dereliction through land reform, will be an essential element of addressing poverty and inequality.

So we need to find a mechanism which enables the transfer of vacant and derelict land and property, from those owners who are doing nothing with it, to new owners who can best make use of it in the public interest – whether they are in the public, private or community sectors. So what's the answer?

Percentage of people living within 500 metres of a derelict site by deprivation



CSO

The recommendation of the LRRG is the introduction of a Compulsory Sale Order – a new measure which would give local authorities the power to force the public auction of vacant and derelict land. After a specified period of time – say 3 years – the owner is contacted and has the option to develop. But if this doesn't happen, then there is a public auction of the property.

In addition, we also recommended that the community should be able to 'trigger' a Compulsory Sale Order. There is clearly no guarantee that the community would be able to acquire the property – they would have to bid alongside other parties at the auction, but either way, the vacant and derelict land ends up in the hands of an owner who will do something productive with it.

Compulsory purchase?

Perhaps the obvious question is why not use existing Compulsory Purchase powers? The problem with compulsory purchase is that:

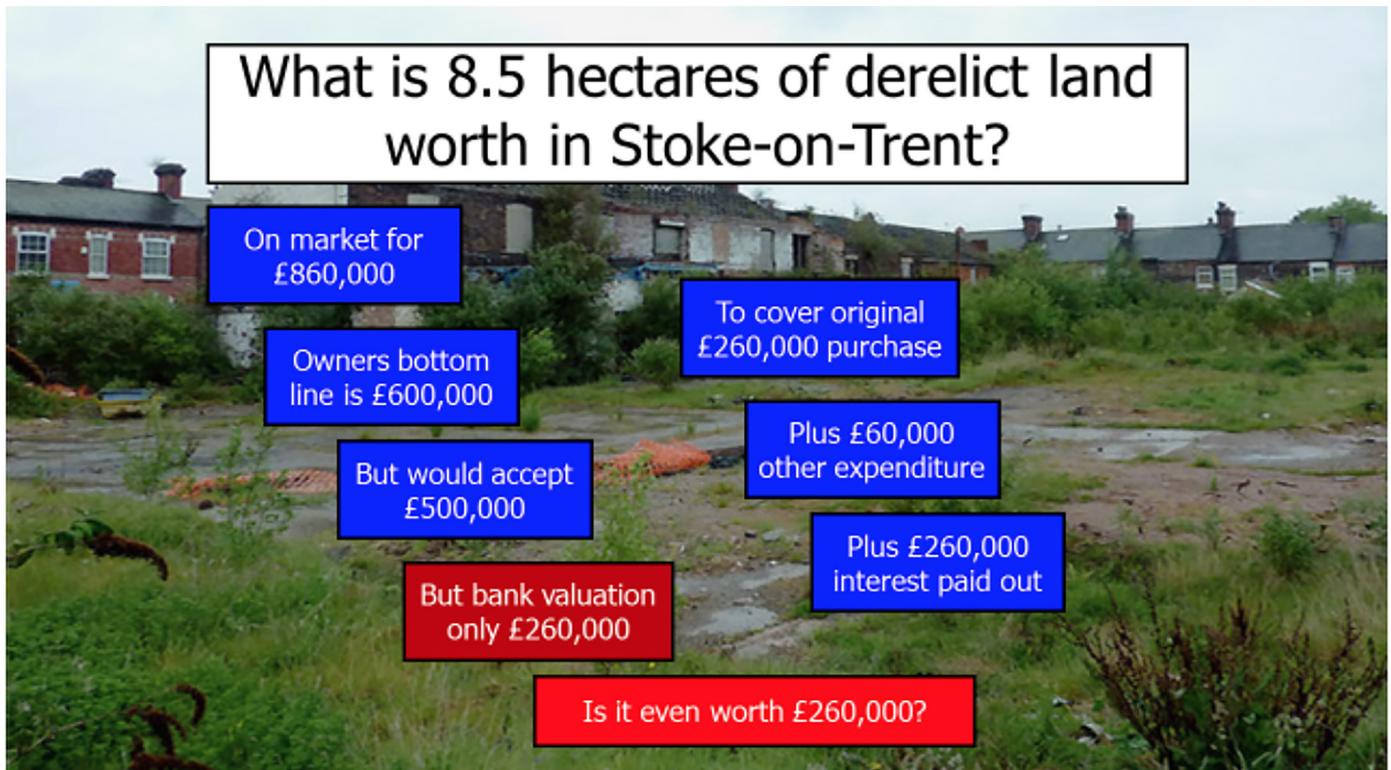
- **Highly complex**, both administratively & legally
- **Financially uncertain** & often very costly to the authority
- Regarded by most politicians as a **last resort**
- **Dependent on professional valuation** & so reinforces urban land price rigidity

One of the key benefits of the Compulsory Sale Order, is that it will inject some realism into urban land markets and most likely have a depressionary impact on land values. One of the advisers to the LRRG, Professor David Adams, gave me this example from his research, which I think illustrates why this is important

Value of Vacant / Derelict Land

The example is from Stoke on Trent and goes back to the late 1990's. What Professor Adams was looking at was the value of 8.5 hectares of derelict land in Stoke

- Site was on the market at £860,000
- When David pushed the owner on his valuation, he admitted vhe would need to clear £600,00
- That's made up by the £260,000 he paid for the land
- Plus £60,000 expenditure – security and other costs
- Plus £260,000 paid out in interest
- However the bank only valued the site at £260,000
- And it's questionable if it even worth that? A public auction would establish the real market value – which is determined not by what the owner thinks it's worth, but what someone else is prepared to pay for the site!



Author: Ian Cooke, Director of Development Trusts Scotland, Paper present at Scotland's Land, Scotsman Conference, 2/6/15, www.scotsmanconferences.com/viewconference.aspx?id=59

Land, land everywhere ... and soon a drop for sale

Scotland still has one of the most concentrated patterns of landownership in Europe – fewer than 500 people own more than half the land, rivers, lochs, mountains and forests. The first Land Reform Act of 2003 which gave communities the right to buy land when it comes up for sale, didn't make a massive change to that grim reality beyond the crofting counties of the Western Isles¹. The Scottish Government cannot finance more than a few community land buyouts each year and individuals cannot get their hands on small, affordable parcels of land. In 2014, the ball is still in the court of the large landowner.

In 1997, the people of Eigg, working together and flat-out for eight long years, raised more money in a public appeal than the combined value of all their own homes and turned the tide of Scottish history.²

Eigg demonstrated that land reform is about people not soil, the present not the past and relevant to every Scottish community, not just remote ones. And yet an Eigg-style buyout is still a giant leap from a standing start for most communities.

1 142 applications to register a community interest in land were submitted under the Land Reform Act and 95 approved. Of these, 33 had the chance to go ahead and purchase land and 11 were successful in doing so, according to Scottish Government figures: less than a one in ten success rate. Outlaw.com 26/07/2012.

2 Eigg was purchased on 12 June 1997 for £1.75 million by the Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust (which took over from the Isle of Eigg Trust), a partnership in which Eigg residents have the majority of trustees along with representatives from Highland Council & the Scottish Wildlife Trust.

As a result, the chain of (largely Hebridean) buyouts has become an ever-growing exception to a still dominant rule of quasi-feudal land ownership. Which means stultifying 'Old Eigg'-style situations are being tolerated by people across Scotland right now, while help is focused on communities able to bid successfully for limited public cash.

Certainly the 2003 Land Reform legislation has helped communities buy land, islands, bridges, pubs, wind turbines, libraries, orchards, woodlands and farms and these ventures have been life-changing for all involved. But there isn't enough cash in Christendom to fund the purchase of very parcel of land, forest or water, nor the energy amongst unpaid volunteers with day jobs. And actually, why should there be? Community buyouts alone cannot reverse the disempowerment experienced all over Scotland today. The community on Eigg is now one of Scotland's most capable – tackling everything from depopulation and climate change to saving the corncrake. But it's been empowerment the very hard way. In more democratic countries with no history of feudalism, community buyouts are unknown. In Norway, for example, land has been owned or rented on long secure leases by tens of thousands of individual Norwegians for centuries. All rural communities also own common land – often planted with trees and co-operatively managed to yield a local income and steady supply of wood – and controlled through small municipal councils.

So there are no community buyouts in Norway. Widespread land ownership, land taxes and local control mean Norwegians communities don't need to buy what individuals already own and voters democratically control. The community buyout is a typically piecemeal, Scottish solution to a larger problem we haven't had the will to tackle universally, systematically or at source. Those who work hardest may escape the blight of feudal-style

land ownership. Those who can't, must bide their time. Don't get me wrong. The amount of money involved in community buyouts has produced amazing returns from relatively small investments. But the wider system has remained intact – and until a few months before the Referendum vote, there seemed no prospect of a solution. Not because Scottish politicians lacked the powers – but because they lacked the will.

This inconvenient truth was mentioned many times during the long independence campaign. At many meetings, undecided voters suggested the SNP's unwillingness to decentralise power or act on land reform was evidence that independence might bring little meaningful change. New boss, same as the old boss was a much repeated fear. But the radical final report of the Land Reform Review Group (LRRG) in May 2014 took cynics by surprise. After a lacklustre interim report a changed committee with a refocused brief produced a game-changing final report.

The LRRG called for an upper/maximum limit on land holdings, the imposition of business rates on sporting estates (they currently pay nothing), a right-to-buy for agricultural tenants and an end to the distinction between inheriting land (where spouses and children have no legal rights) and 'moveable' property like houses (where they do).

The Scottish Government promised to consider the report and submit a new Land Reform Bill before the next Holyrood elections in 2016. Civil servants who might have been negotiating independence began drafting that legislation instead and in late November, an adventurous programme of land reform took centre stage in Nicola Sturgeon's legislative programme.

There is a consultation period, during which Scotland landowners will doubtless make loud protests. But if the Bill goes ahead unchanged, Scotland's big landowners must prepare for intervention in their hitherto private domains.

The Land Reform Bill will re-introduce business rates on sporting estates (they currently pay none) and use the proceeds to boost the Land Fund for community buyouts to £10 million per annum until 2020. It will introduce a new power for Ministers to intervene where the scale of ownership or conduct of landowners is a barrier to the sustainable development of local communities. That could check acquisitive new landowners like billionaire Dane Anders Povlsen whose Highland purchases have apparently made him the second biggest landowner in Scotland after the Duke of Buccleuch. It could also let Ministers intervene where communities feel existing landowners are such poor custodians of the land (and buildings they allow tenants to lease) that local communities are unsustainable.

The Bill will also place duties on trustees of charities with large chunks of land to ensure effective engagement with local people over the way they manage it – that could tackle a recent trend of large estates being managed by a hard to access trust, whose private decisions nonetheless have huge public impacts – on house-building, community development and the viability of local businesses. Companies owning land will have to be registered in the EU – not offshore tax havens.

A separate Bill on Succession law will democratise inheritance so children and spouses have equal shares of the land in their parents' estate – currently siblings only have equal title to property. It's already been claimed this could cripple small farms which might not be viable if split into three or four equal units. That's true. That's why, in most neighbouring countries with equal land inheritance, one sibling will often "buy out" the others to let one small farm continue viably and ensure that the keenest farmer takes over not just the eldest. The need to properly compensate siblings has also helped fuel the Nordic cabin culture – brothers and sisters are often given a bit of land to build a weekend hut in lieu of cash. It's true that as land values rise, it gets more difficult to "buy out" other siblings. But the same problem applies to inherited property. Somehow, reasonable systems tend to produce reasonable solutions. And no country seems to think that favouring just one child is any kind of answer.

Essentially, the Scottish Government has initiated changes which have stood the test of time in almost every neighbouring democracy – changes that will release the natural forces of inheritance to encourage the organic break-up of large estates into more manageable, affordable, varied and accessible land parcels.

Finally, after centuries of secrecy about the extent and value of land holdings in Scotland, there is to be transparency with a Scottish Land Register that will contain detailed information on all government-owned land within five years. That may be an optimistic timescale unless more resources are committed to the task. One council land lawyer told me that working alone she might take fifty rather than five years to complete the task – and that's dealing with wings of government that are required to comply. Without extra staff and powers of compulsion the task of gathering accurate information

from reluctant private landowners may be even more difficult.

Perhaps, given the Scots long experience of exclusion from the land, the Scottish Government could create a visible, symbolic building where a physical copy of the Land Register can be inspected by Scots and homecoming visitors to gain basic information about the land they regard as home. Finally, such an idea is at least possible.

The Bill will also create a new democratic terrain relating to land ownership, populated by explicitly interventionist institutions like the Land Reform Commission. And Nicola Sturgeon has promised to review the council tax allowing campaigners to argue for land taxation as a better replacement which could shift the burden from those on low incomes, stimulate the economy and present landowners and speculators with a financial incentive to 'divest' fallow acres and unused buildings or face eye-watering tax demands.

But that all lies ahead. So too does action to allow greater access to land and Scotland's marine heritage -- many rivers are timeshared into the next century, many lochs are effectively out of bounds and the coastline and foreshore are still managed by a distant Crown Estates Commission (even when the powers of that London-based body are devolved).

The prospects for tenant farmers are less clear. Across Europe tenant farmers usually own their farmhouse and around 100 acres of surrounding farmland – they only tenant or lease extra land, to allow for flexibility. In Scotland however, tenant farmers tend to own nothing – not even their own farmhouses – no matter how large or profitable their farming operation. That means many live without security, and therefore without the opportunity to borrow against their property to buy equipment or make improvements.

According to historian Prof Jim Hunter, a tenant farmer's right to buy would be the most significant measure to help break up large estates, partly because it would happen quickly, whilst the other changes might take decades: 'By enabling virtually all of Ireland's tenant farmers to buy their farms and advancing cash to help them do so, the Wyndham Act of 1903, eliminated big estates from Ireland and made the entire country, both south and north of the present border, a place where farms and smallholdings are overwhelmingly owner-occupied.'

Will the same thing happen here?

The Land Reform Review Group did propose a conditional right to buy – but the issue was taken out of land reform legislation to be considered in a separate review chaired by Environment Secretary Richard Lochhead. Tenant farmers fear this means lawyers and landed interests will persuade the Scottish Government that championing their rights will be a bridge too far. By the time you are reading this, we should know which way the pendulum has swung.

So is the land reform package too radical – a "Mugabe style land grab" as some critics have suggested? Any innovation in a stubbornly unchanging landscape will always seem threatening – but Scotland is only catching up with the more transparent and democratic way the rest of northern Europe has managed land for centuries. Scotland formally abolished feudalism only a decade back so the trappings of that cap-doffing culture are still firmly in place across rural Scotland. The presumption that land will always be too expensive for local use – even when derelict-- also sits unexamined in many cities. The urban empire of the land speculator must be the next to fall.

If passed, the combination of recommendations in this new Land Reform Act will see large estates break up 'naturally' into more manageable, diverse blocks over time. But the onus for action will still fall upon individuals and communities – a daunting prospect in areas where the landowner has been landlord, employer and big cheese for generations. Certainly it may take years before land is more accessible for rural housing, businesses and farmers. As David Cameron of Community Land Scotland says; "The acid test will be whether in a decade's time... Scotland's land is still largely owned by a small and privileged elite."

Scottish politicians have had the power to make these changes since 1999, but lacked the political will, fearing perhaps that a doubtful, timorous public might not support the concerted change needed to face down landowner protests and modernise Scottish society.

Thanks to the activism and awareness-raising of the Referendum Summer of 2014 though, that fear has been largely erased. Now we are witnessing a revitalised Scottish Government which can hopefully depend on Labour and the Lib Dems in parliament and tens of thousands of well organised activists outside to support change.

In finding the courage to free up land, the Scottish Government is also freeing itself from a harmful reliance on large landowners to deliver policy objectives as varied as renewable energy targets, reforestation and rural housing.

It may take legal effort to stop some landowners circumventing new laws and physical effort to reverse decades of soil degradation and overgrazing in some areas. But there's no doubt that with democratic stewardship and new non-traditional landowners, a thousand flowers could blossom – quite literally – as the Highland mono-culture of the sporting estate makes way for long-denied diversity, negligent and monopoly landowners are removed, trust-run landowners must involve communities in land use decisions and the Crown Estates Commission finally transfers land and income to the Scottish Parliament which will in turn pass responsibilities and cash onto relevant councils.

It would have helped reboot democracy if that cash had o'erleaped councils and been handed directly to coastal communities. But that kind of change is still a way off.

Either way, there is no doubt the latest Land Reform Bill will make a long overdue start on this massive task.

How massive? Well in his seminal book *Who Owns Scotland*, Andy Wightman observed that 25 per cent of large estates have been held by the same family for over four centuries, and the majority of aristocratic families who owned land in 1872 still own it today.

Indeed, it's more than a century since an open challenge to Scotland's concentrated pattern of landownership was last mounted.

In 1909 Tom Johnston's exposé of the Scottish aristocracy *Our Scots Noble Families* became a controversial bestseller. He noted with outrage that just a century earlier miners and salt workers were 'bought and sold as part and parcel of the pits in which they were condemned to work for life,' and he recounted Hugh Miller's description of a 'slave village' at Niddrie Mill near Edinburgh where the collier

women, 'poor, over-toiled creatures,' carried coal up a long stair inserted in one of the shafts, 'shifting a hundredweight from sea level to the top of Ben Lomond with each day's labour³.' The young journalist then 'exposed' the people he blamed for such exploitation – every noble family in the land:

The Scott's of Buccleugh [sic], descended from border thieves, land pirates and freebooters, still boast their pedigree. The blood of knaves and moonlighters has by process of snobbery become blue blood; lands raped from the weak and unfortunate now support arrogance in luxury.

And Johnston famously concluded:

Today in Scotland our artisans and peasants appear to believe that these ancient noble families hold their privileges and lands at the behest of Divine Providence; that their wealth has been justly earned and that their titles are but rewards for honest service to the state. The first step in reform... is to destroy those superstitions. Show the people that our old nobility is not noble; that its lands are stolen lands – stolen either by force or fraud. So long as half a dozen families own one half of Scotland, so long will countless families own none of it.

This angry revolutionary went on to become the outstanding secretary of state for Scotland in the wartime coalition under Churchill, who finally brought electricity to the Highlands by compelling landowners to make land available for hydro-electric dams in support of the war effort. And yet even with such formidable power, the exceptional Tom Johnston could not push any further against landed power.

³ Brian Osborne in the introduction to Thomas Johnston, *Our Scots Noble Families*.

This is the scale of Scotland's historic land problem – a problem that could soon be undone. We are not there yet – legal change is not yet in the bag. Some powerful figures in the Scottish Government may doubt that land reform is a pivotal issue in a largely urban country. Agricultural tenants may miss out and it may take decades before landowning patterns in Scotland are noticeably different.

In the meantime, Scotland's law and tax systems still encourage vast estates and absent landowners and stifled, frustrated communities like pre-buyout Eigg exist across the country. In such areas, questions about the way land is owned are still regarded as rude, personal gripes or a sheer irrelevance. Yet we are physical creatures who experience the world first and foremost via the patch of earth that supports and surrounds us. To ask who owns it is simply to pose a basic question about democracy and human development. A nation has no greater asset than its people and yet the energy of many Scots has been wasted, in a mass of uneven battles for basic human rights over centuries. It took 65 people on Eigg eight years and a community buyout to simply issue each island tenant with a lease. No wonder Scots have been ground down. No wonder a grim air of defiance is all many have inherited.

No wonder people have left. The miracle is that so many have stayed. Those hardy souls have self-selected as stoic beyond belief and thoroughly adapted to their environments. To lose them now would be to lose an essential building block in a delicate human ecosystem.

And yet, those precious people are still leaving rural communities for the age-old reasons – no land, no housing and no prospects. The good news is that once government throws its weight behind ordinary people, they tend to do pretty well. Eigg is now thriving in its own eccentric, co-operative, creative and eco-friendly way and the buds of hope and capacity still exist in each patient, thwarted community. The job of a democracy is simply to shift heaven and earth to let those buds blossom.

And in the most successful democracies, that has meant keeping power and cash at community level. Not here.

Extract from Wee White Blossom by Lesley Riddoch

A stylized graphic of a city skyline with four buildings of varying heights, each filled with a green grid pattern. The buildings are set against a light green, abstract landscape background with rounded shapes. The text 'OUR LAND' is overlaid on the image in a large, bold, black, sans-serif font.

OUR LAND

SCOTTISH LAND FESTIVAL 2015
