

Letter from Scotland

Who is best placed to look after Scotland's hills and glens, moorlands, forests and peat bogs?

This perennial issue has come into leaf again this week with the passing of the Wildlife Management Bill and the publication of the government's new Land Reform Bill.



Monarch of the Glen. Who owns Scotland? PHOTO John Knox

The bill has highlighted Scotland's extraordinarily high concentration of land ownership. Some 57 per cent of rural land is owned by private landlords, according to the government. The land campaigner, lawyer and former Green MSP, Andy Wightman, says that's just 400 families and a handful of those own huge estates. Some 12 per cent of rural land is owned by public bodies such as the Forestry Commission and Scottish Water. 3 per cent is owned by local communities, and 2.5 per cent by charities such as the RSPB, the National Trust, the Woodland Trust, the John Muir Trust and, strangely, the Church of England. The rest is owned by farmers or small landowners.

It's always a divisive issue when city politicians begin to think rural thoughts. There have been famous battles fought over fox-hunting, the "right to roam", the community right to buy, national parks. This week's Wildlife Management Bill is no less controversial, with landowners saying it's yet more unwanted regulation but conservationists saying it's proper protection of the environment which is slowly being destroyed.

The Bill introduces licences for the use of animal traps and grouse shooting and permits will be needed for "muirburn" operations – the burning of heather to encourage new growth. SSPCA officers will be given more powers to collect evidence of illegal trapping or poisoning of rare species, as in the case of the hen harrier which disappeared in the Angus Glens this week. The estate owners say their practices are already preserving bio-diversity and are carried out by experienced game keepers who know how to look after the countryside. Besides, they provide employment for 8,000 people and contribute £350 million a year to the Scottish economy.

The Land Reform Bill will, in the government's words, "revolutionise land ownership in Scotland". Ministers will be given the power to break up any estate over 1,000 hectares if it is offered for sale. Local communities will have advance

notice of any sale. And all large estates, of over 3,000 hectares, will have to have a management plan which shows clear community benefits and progress towards zero-net-carbon.

How will our major land owners reaction to all this? The Duke of Buccleuch is already divesting himself of land. He's been overtaken as Scotland's largest private landowner by one of the new generation of foreign owners, the Danish clothing tycoon Anders Holch Povlsen who owns 220,000 acres spread over 12 estates (and also the former Jenners store). Another of the new "lairds" is Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid al-Maktoum, the ruler of Dubai. He owns the 63,000 acre estate of Inverinate in Western Ross. And we've recently learned about Ming Wai, the Chinese owner of Auch and Invermearan estate in Perthshire.

These new owners undoubtedly bring new investment and new ideas to their estates. Some are good, like the mini-hydro scheme on the Corrour estate on Rannoch Moor, paid for by the Swedish Tetra Pak heiress Lisbet Rausing. She and her husband have since handed over the 65,000 acre estate to a Trust. But there are also bad ideas, like Sheikh Mohammed's helicopter pad. And sometimes new owners, like the old ones, show an unwillingness to move on from the old field sports of grouse shooting and deer stalking.

The sad truth is the issue of land reform touches a raw and very old nerve in the Scottish body politic. It goes back to the clans and the clearances and the absentee landlords of the 19th and 20th centuries. It's a divide between the rich and the rest, the lowlands and the highlands, and these days, between the conservationists and the developers.

The issue that may eventually trump these divisions is climate change. When the "emergency" becomes a catastrophe, we may discover that it doesn't matter who owns the land, we just need to save it.



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