

## Land Reform and Human Values

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A professor at the Free Church of Scotland College, Edinburgh, reviews the nature and scale of the land reform programme to which the people of Scotland are entitled.

I HAVE BEEN struck with a sense of our human finitude. It's not simply the scale of the problems: so many and so complex that they can easily overwhelm and paralyse us. It includes that, of course, but there is something deeper. In the Old Testament, the land was apportioned to the children of Israel by lot. No tribe could point to any particular spot and say, "That's where we want to start." Their territory was a matter of lot. It might be rich pasture or hill country or even desert. But it was a given. Similarly, under the old crofting arrangements in the Highlands the various strips of land were allocated by lot. To this day, that is how individual crofts are referred to in Gaelic: "So-and-So's lot."

My own lot was to be born in a black house on the island of Lewis. It could have been very different. But for the War, my lot would have been a tenement in Govan. I would have been equally proud, I hope, of both. But that was my starting-point. I had no control over it. It defined me, but it fell to me entirely by lot.

Today, we have our own

lot. We have to set out from where we are. The movement for land reform starts at our feet. We might wish for a different, less encumbered, stronger starting-point. But it's not ours to ask. Instead, we have to assure ourselves, against every hint of pessimism, that from where we are there is a road to justice and reform.

And we can never forget that the lots fall unequally. Some are born heirs to huge estates. Others are born to homelessness and insecurity. That's why the land cannot be left to the forces of the market. There must always be a place for public vigilance and state intervention. We have to limit the powerful; and we have to empower the powerless.

I have been struck, too, with the importance of the idea of stewardship. "Who made the land?" My answer, obviously, is that God made it. Indeed, Maker-of-the Land is a good basic definition of God. But what matters for the present is this: Whoever made it still owns it and still retains control of it. He gives it space to be itself; and he gives us

space, too, to be ourselves upon it. But he has left us in no mistake as to His own wishes. He has given us clear mandates. We are to guard the land from all that threatens it; and we are to serve it. And then, but only then, we are to colonise it: exploring it, filling it, cultivating and developing it.

And precisely because we are stewards, we are accountable. Every single man or woman who has power over the land is answerable for the way they use that power. We are answerable, vertically, to God, who will one day call every landowner to account. But we are accountable, too, to the community. No man has the right to run huge estates in his own individual interest, or for his own personal pleasure, regardless of the common good. He holds his land from the community. Part of the merit of a Land Value Tax is that it recognises that and seeks to exact realistic rent for land ceded to the individual.

At the same time, we are accountable, as whole communities, to the poor. Land reform must never

lose sight of Scotland's underclass. From the very highest source there comes the imperative, "Remember the poor!" Remember the underclass! And remember those below them: the submerged class of homeless, address-less individuals too insignificant to figure even as statistics. Let's indeed give each space to enjoy his own. But let's insist, equally, that everyone who owns land owns it in, with and for the community.

Thirdly, the issue of land reform is bound up inextricably with the question of freedom. We cannot be free on another man's land. That's no problem so long as each merely has enough for his own use: as much as he can cultivate or manage. But it becomes an enormous problem when huge areas of land are held by one individual, taken out of public circulation, turned into exclusion zones and run as private fiefdoms for one's own monopolistic use. We have no freedom to walk there or to roam or to hunt or to fish. Our children cannot play there. The community has to go to the landowner, cap-in-hand, for ground to build houses or land to erect a pier or to improve a road. By exercising his feudal rights he might even deny freedom of worship to a whole county.

We are slaves of our past, oppressed by title-deeds which do no more than give a veneer of legality to the whims of ancient monarchs, the crimes of mediaeval brigands and the

insufferable vanity of Highland chieftains.

AT THE MOMENT, many of us are anxiously awaiting the Report of the Public Enquiry into the proposed Lingerbay super-quarry. But one thing is already clear: the decision will not be taken by the local community, the people of Harris. They will simply have to go along with it. They own the agrarian rights to the whole area. They can grave it and they can cut peats on it (well, on some of it!). But they cannot prevent the precious ore being shipped away, the site itself being buried under the sea or the vital fishing grounds polluted by toxic ballast.

Why? Because they don't own the mineral rights. The land (and the community) is the victim of divided ownership, the agrarian rights belonging to one party and the mineral rights to another. And the latter is in the driving-seat. He will make a fortune out of the royalties on the ore. He can hold the whole community to ransom by the offer of jobs. Above all, once he gets the permission of the Secretary of State he can sweep away a whole culture, built up over a thousand years, merely by invoking the principles of "commercial reality". Because the people don't own the land, they don't control it; and because they don't control the land, they don't control their own destiny. They are not free.

I WOULD like to invoke two simple principles.

First, pride without xenophobia. We are proud of our land. It defines us. Location, people, language and history make us what we are, and all of these are bound up, inextricably, with the land. But such patriotism is no racism and such pride must not degenerate into xenophobia. Even the most ancient inhabitants of these islands were once in-comers. The fragile, broken stranger deserves refuge. The dynamic, creative stranger deserves a welcome. In either case, the child born to the stranger is one of us. One generation should suffice for integration.

Finally, *semper reformanda*. It is an old ecclesiastical principle: the church needs constant ongoing reformation. It applies equally to land reform. One of the anxieties expressed repeatedly is that the necessary research has not been done and that a Bill presented early in the Scottish parliament would be ill-considered and amount to little more than a token fulfilment of the Government's Manifesto commitment. I share some of that anxiety.

Yet there is force in the argument that the past has seen research and enquiry and reports aplenty and that the time has now come for action. I'm sure that's true. We know enough to move to immediate legislation on some of the key issues such as the taxing of sporting estates and the right to roam: even, in my view, on the integration of agrarian and mineral rights and on tenants' right to buy.