

## **Widening economic opportunity – the land ownership question**

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Scotland stands out for its many progressive achievements down the centuries, but also for something less progressive, its enduring concentrated land ownership patterns. Seldom anywhere do so few own so much.

Recent research suggests a current drift toward even fewer owning even more, and this despite 25 years of consistent policy favouring greater ownership diversity. A policy aim shared by all the governing parties since devolution.

Policy that hasn't delivered intended outcomes in over a quarter of a century is in need radical reappraisal.

Much debate about land focusses on land use and not the more fundamental question of ownership. Land use is of course important, and government both has and uses many instruments to influence or control aspects of land use, but they have few tools to impact ownership or have chosen not to use some they do have.

Debate on land use diverts attention from a land ownership debate and is of course the preferred focus of the interests who own most land. But to fail to address the ownership question is to fail to address the major economic consequences that flow from highly concentrated ownership, the concentration wealth, power, influence, and economic opportunity in very few hands.

This limit to greater economic participation constrains the liberation of enterprise and creativity that would come with greater ownership diversity, constrains opportunity and choice. The challenge to achieve greater land ownership diversity is fundamentally an economic challenge and sits at the heart of how a thriving and more inclusive economy could develop. Significantly more community ownership should be part of the ownership mix and a key means to increase participation, promote enterprise and develop community wealth, but a future with much more private, public, co-operative ownership should be the aim, with environment NGO ownership continuing its distinct contribution – a truly vibrant, diverse, colourful, mixed economy of ownership bringing fresh initiative and widened opportunity. New forms of collaborative ownership between key actors need to develop to maximise opportunities. We need to see more land tenancies emerging as an aim of change.

To achieve all this, we need to place the economic opportunity real change can deliver at the centre of policy thinking. Change to the way current ownership patterns corner the economic advantage of land ownership for the few through local land monopoly, a rentier economy and capital gain underpinned by massive public subsidy. Diversifying ownership as a cornerstone of developing a more inclusive and enterprising economy is a legitimate aim and needs to be supported by a range of policies. It also needs to develop from just a policy aim to a legislative aim, giving real power and drive to its achievement.

Within the policy framework needed, regulation, taxation and public subsidy regimes need to positively encourage wider ownership. A more interventionist state has an increased role it can play in both owning and facilitating greater ownership diversity. Regulating the land market should be seen as virtuous in advancing the public interest in achieving greater ownership diversity, not dismissed as burdensome. Within regulation, land valuation reform and even price controls could have a role to play. Local authorities, beyond just their physical planning role could be charged with systematically assessing demand for land (owned and tenanted), reporting publicly, and charged with taking steps to meet assessed demand.

Legislation will be needed, defining regulatory arrangements, public body responsibilities, framing taxation rules. Overarching such detail needs to sit a legislative framework for driving progress rooted in the legitimate aim to progressively achieve materially greater land ownership diversity, using all means at the disposal of government to deliver expanded economic goals. Regular parliamentary accountability will be a vital component of successful delivery.

Proponents of the status quo will see many threats from such an agenda and should be expected to defend their economic interests. Those interests enjoy property rights but these need to be balanced with the public interest in achieving the greater economic diversity constrained by an historic ownership legacy. In a country with uniquely concentrated land ownership patterns any change requires that those who own most will need to own a bit less in future if others are to be given opportunity, if wealth is to be more equally shared, if communities themselves are to build wealth.

The Land Commission's promotion of the ScotLand Futures discussion is timely, and they should have a key ongoing role at the heart of delivering progressive change.

We owe it to future generations to face up to the land concentration question, to test the boundaries of the law and land rights to their fullest extent, to bring about the much fairer distribution of opportunity, wealth, power, and influence I am clear the majority in Scotland would favour.