

Friday 23 August 2019

“I don’t think it is healthy in 21st century Scotland

to allow the unregulated concentration of power,” says Andrew Thin

Discussion around land reform and the resulting power imbalance that happens with unregulated land ownership across Scotland, flowed today at a debate titled ‘Who Owns Scotland’s Land’ at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. Chaired by the head of Christian Aid Scotland, Sally Foster Fulton, the event was sponsored by Quakers Scotland. The speakers included; author and activist Alastair McIntosh, gaelic book publisher and Chair of a community owned estate, Galson Estate Trust, Agnes Rennie, the Chair of the Scottish Land Commission, Andrew Thin and Executive Director of Scottish Land & Estates, Sarah-Jane Laing.

The big questions were not only who does in fact own Scotland’s land, but what has been done to counteract the unrestricted power that came with owning huge swathes of land across the country.

Andrew McIntosh said that the results of a report released this year, titled, ‘investigation into issues associated with large scale, concentrated land ownership in Scotland’, confirms why he went into land reform in the 1990s. “Perhaps most worrying however, was the fear of repercussions from going against the landowner expressed by some people. This fear was rooted firmly in the concentration of power in some communities and the perceived ability of landowners to conflict consequences such as the eviction or blacklisting for employment contracts on residents as they so wish.”

This sentiment was shared by Andrew Thin, saying, “If you allow the unregulated concentration of land ownership, you allow the unregulated concentration of power, and then you have to depend on people setting examples and you have to depend on the good will of those people. In no other section of our economy do we allow that kind of monopoly... We’re regulated, we have set systems across the economy for regulating this, but we don’t do it with land.”

Though Sarah-Jane Laing agreed that responsible land ownership is incredibly important, she disagreed that owning land should come down to fairness, “I don’t believe that land reform should be based on a premise of fairness of ownership,” she said, adding, “Nor do I believe that the land reform debate should continue as it has, at times, on this very divisive basis of ‘them and us’. I truly believe that land reform has a place to play in a modern Scotland, but the best outcome for Scotland’s land and people will be achieved if we can move that land reform debate into one which focuses on ‘us and we.’”

The topic moved towards the potential of community-based land ownership, a setup that allows those in the community to be in the driving seat of estates and their profit-making land, something that Gaelic book publisher, Agnes Rennie knows well. Rennie is the Chair of the Galson Estate Trust (Urras Oighreachd Ghabhsainn), which has been community owned since 2007. She said, “we’ve grown from a situation where there was nobody employed by that estate. A very passive relationship with the then landowners, not a bad relationship, but entirely passive. To a situation now where we use that 56,000 acre asset, which is owned and managed by the community.”

She went on to add that she thinks we’re just at the beginning of looking at community owned land. “Community owned land is only part of the land reform agenda, but it’s a hugely important part of it, and it’s one where we can learn from each other.”

The discussion moved to the identity of the landowners who own huge swathes of land across Scotland and about how, to some of our speakers, this was very important. “It is essential we know who owns land. We cannot possibly have engagement with owners if we don’t know who the owners are. Scottish Government have said very, very clearly that needs to happen, it needs to happen as quickly as possible.” Said Thin, adding, “It’s taking longer frankly than I would like it to happen. The current aspiration is that the register will be complete by 2026.”

Laing said from a Scottish Landed Estates perspective that we should “make sure that we’re not basing some of our current perceptions on things which were wrong a couple of decades ago. There definitely was this veil of secrecy over property and land ownership in urban Scotland as well as rural Scotland and it needed to change.”

Charlotte Square Gardens, Edinburgh

10 - 26 August 2019

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The final question asked why had it taken so long to find out the answer to the question of who owned Scotland's land, Thin wryly replied, "I think the short answer is that before 1999 The House of Lords had influence over what happens in Scotland."