There is much that concerns me in the Land Reform Bill as owner/manager of Cultybraggan Farm (214ha) in the southern uplands of Perthshire.

ACCESS AND PUBLIC GOOD

Cultybraggan Farm is a livestock farm which lies immediately to the West and South of Comrie. The problems that were anticipated in submissions to the Scottish Parliament in relation to the Land Reform Scotland Act (2003) have indeed occurred. The current Land Reform Bill is on course to make matters even more problematical in terms of running such a farm in an effective manner. Ill thought out bureaucracy creates a substantial burden to the farm that, contrary to common belief, is no where near compensated through farm subsides. The promised education of the public regarding rural matters never effectively happened. The Access Code has no legal backing. It is seldom read and is widely abused. The largely urbanized residents of (and visitors to) Comrie now appear to have even less basic knowledge of how to conduct themselves on farmland and what they can reasonably expect of farmers. The bureaucracy and unproductive intrusion of government departments and their agencies gets worse. It should be no surprise that the much vaunted Scottish livestock industry is in serious decline. I refer especially to the basis of the Scottish beef industry – the suckler herds of cattle. Livestock and people do not mix. People taking access to livestock farms must either be appropriately and effectively educated (and effectively controlled) as to how to behave. Funds need to be provided from government sources to provide and maintain such access on livestock farms. With regard to livestock farms next urban settlements the public should be required to keep to the right of ways (some 5 miles at Cultybragan Farm). The gates and styles for public access need to be compatible for retaining modern cattle in the fields in which the cattle were placed. As a consequence of advances in genetics, such cattle are now much larger than they used to be. A fact apparently not recognised by SNH or Perth & Kinross Council.

The better in-by land of Scottish upland farms is likely to be close to settlements. This has been so since Roman days. The problems created for such farms by the massive enlargement and increased urbanisation of such settlements were highlighted by many at the time of the Land Reform Scotland Act (2003), but were largely ignored by the government of the day.

The situation is now much worse, creating many problems and substantial unnecessary costs when trying to run a livestock farm which aims to achieve a high quality suckler beef herd. Excessive environmental bureaucracy has lowered the standard of environmental quality in the area rather than improved it.

Cultybraggan Farm provides a huge amount of public good in terms of the environment, wildlife, efficient food production and some 5 miles of right of way. To keep the farm going all subsidy monies go straight into the local economy through employment and purchase of materials and local services.
Yet more and more burdens are put on the Farm through ill conceived bureaucracy - be it via SNH, SEPA, Perth & Kinross Council, Historic Scotland, etc. The subsidy payment to such a farm as Cultybraggan Farm nowhere near meets the extra costs incurred. There is a serious imbalance between letting farmers farm in the manner that hey are very good at and the gross over emphasis on the narrow focus of some 28 lobby groups that operate under the umbrella of “Environment Link.” - none of which have any significant personal financial responsibility for what they demand.

COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

Trying to run Cultybraggan Farm also highlights the major problems with how Community Ownership of land has worked out in some key areas. [REDACTED]. Having a dream is all very well, but somebody somewhere has to pay for it. Likewise, a political ideology embedded in a manifesto needs to be economically sound.

Farmer/landowners such as myself are assured by the SNP Scottish Government that we have nothing to fear. Yet from reading the Land Reform Bill it would appear that such reassurance carries little conviction. We are still reeling from the breakdown of trust that followed the Land Reform Scotland Act (2003) when the Labour/Liberal Democrats held the roost at Holyrood.

LAND COMMISSIONERS

The proposed appointment of a Land Commissioner “with teeth” to oversee a group of 5 such commissioners is a worrying prospect, as their appointments have all to be approved by a Scottish Minister. It could well turn out to be like the distinguished theologian, Alison Elliot, being appointed to chair the Land Reform Review Group (LRRG). She could well be an expert in social ideology, but apparently has no particular expertise in land management, livestock management or rural economics. Her co-members showed a propensity of interest in the Highlands & Islands with their large estates and small crofts, while the interests of the 10,000 farms of more average size elsewhere in Scotland were largely ignored.

Since the present interim land commissioner boss seems to be reasonable, there is a belief that this situation might hold in perpetuity should the Bill become an Act. That assumes a lot of trust that may not be merited. I understand that the proposed five commissioners be mostly made up of lawyers, accountants and others with little or no thorough training and experience in pragmatic land and livestock management, along with the relevant science. In addition such commissioners need to have substantial knowledge of land and livestock economics.

I made what I believe to be a significant and rational complaint to the Charity Regulator at OSCR about the conduct of the [REDACTED]. His appointment as regulator has to be approved by the Scottish Government. My concerns were dismissed and I was informed that the matter was “closed”. The Chief Executive of OCSR is alleged to have previously been a senior official in the First Minister’s Office.
DEER MANAGEMENT AND SHOOTING RIGHTS

Assessing the value of shooting rights on all land with a view to introducing taxation would appear to be yet another layer of government bureaucracy. While being an irrelevant burden on modest sized farms, it could well damage the employment of scarce personnel who have the necessary skills – such as gamekeepers. Should this happen it would be the environment that would suffer.


The conference was chaired by Alison Elliot, chairperson of the LRRG. There was a largely irrelevant historical perspective, presumably geared to stimulate inappropriate patriotic emotions rather than an analysis of present day needs. This was followed by a highly biased account of community land ownership by the chairman of the charity Community Land Scotland, ex-MSP Peter Peacock. According to him everything was splendid. Everything was sustainable. Community buyouts were a great success. The major problem with Isle of Gigha was dismissed as not being significant. When I challenged him concerning the [REDACTED] he indicated that he was not aware of that particular trust, indicating that there were too many for him to remember. Yet my understanding is that there are only about 10 major community buy-outs of land. The problem was that in his address he gave no meaningful analysis, but only political propaganda.

Campaigner journalist, “researcher” with an agenda, Andy Wightman reiterated his crusade as to who owns Scotland, portraying the biggest landowners as potential tax evaders and money launderers with little evidence to support such a contention. According to him, in too many instances nobody knows who owns what. But, in a recently published investigation, only one out of the 30 largest landowners in Scotland was not clearly identified. I do not recall him giving any analysis of how well or badly these large estates were managed or how many of them were economically dependent on money coming from outside Scotland. My modest sized farm neighbours with one of the 30 biggest estates. It is well run and does a great deal of public good. Another neighbour is small but owned by [REDACTED]. It likewise is well run and provides a lot of public good.

There appears to be no objective concise analysis of the responses received by Scottish Parliament officials to the earlier LRRG Report consultation. There is a lack of trust in the hyperbole generated by those promoting the Bill.

The Land Reform Bill is being rushed through the Scottish Parliament with indecent haste, yet the Bill could well be seriously damaging to a large number of Scottish farms of modest size but which are key to the production of quality Scottish food and drink, the maintenance of the Scottish landscape and biodiversity.. Scotland’s landscape has been created by generations of Scotland’s farmers. Please do not make our job any more difficult than it need be.
The attached relates the comments of Gordon, a stock bull at Cultybraggan Farm, when asked what he thought of the Land Reform Bill.

"I am willing to cooperate and be productive, but do not mess me about – I live here"
Commenting on the Land Reform Bill
Gordon, stock bull at Cultrybraggan Farm, Comrie, said

“I am willing to cooperate and be productive,

but

DO NOT MESS WITH ME – I LIVE HERE”