Written submission from the League Against Cruel Sports

Introduction

The League Against Cruel Sports campaigns against animals being harmed in the name of sport. We have an interest in land reform because the current regime of land ownership in Scotland allows large areas of land to be used for driven bird shooting.

Previously, arguments around shooting tend to coalesce around animal welfare on one hand and economics on the other. We believe that the current debate around land reform is an opportunity to move beyond this and show that reform of shooting and land ownership is needed not just for animal welfare purposes, but also because it would create a more equitable rural Scotland.

Comments are:

Land Commissioners, Part 2 Chapter 1, 11 (2) (b)

The line that suggests that commissioners should be removed from post if they are convicted of a prison sentence of more than 3 months should be changed. At the moment, wildlife crimes rarely attract custodial sentences. However, it would be inappropriate for a serving member of the commission to be convicted of a wildlife crime yet still remain in post.

Part 3, Information on the control of land

The League Against Cruel Sports would like to see information on who owns relatively large areas of land being freely and publically available. The League also think it would be beneficial if the public could check if landowners had committed any offences, particularly those relating to their management of the land (ie, vicarious liability).

Part 6, Sporting rates

We wholeheartedly support the move to end rates exemptions for shooting estates. It is glaringly unfair that they are given tax breaks which are not given to other forms of land use and rural businesses. We hope the rest of the UK follows suit in ending tax exemptions for bloodsports.

Driven bird shooting in particular is bad for the environment, in that muirburn erodes topsoil, and hill tracks are also environmentally damaging. While this year has been bad for grouse shooting because of the weather, in general there is a trend for the intensification of driven bird shooting. We hope that removing the exemption for sporting rates will remove an incentive to run shoots, but believe there is a strong case for pursuing the licensing of shooting estates.
It is also worth noting that the Land Reform Review Group found that some activities practised by driven bird shoots, including muirburn, could be a drain on the public purse, and that forestry was a more sustainable and socially and economically beneficial use of land than driven bird shooting.

**Part 8, Deer Management**

Some deer estates prefer to keep the numbers of deer artificially high, to allow for a higher chance of guests being able to shoot one. This can lead to a great deal of damage to the environment and we are pleased to see this problem being addressed in the Land Reform Bill.

Suggested changes are:

5a) 12 months seems an excessive length of time to prepare and submit a deer management plan. 3 or 6 months would be more reasonable.

**Part 10, Agricultural Holdings**

18 A 3 – This clause, and several others in the Bill, use the Agriculture (Scotland) Act 1948 as a baseline for “good husbandry”. However, this Act has been superseded by several other pieces of legislation in more recent times, most notably the Wildlife and Natural Environment Act 2011, which covers the use of snares, vicarious liability, and other offences which could reasonably be thought of as involving some level of animal husbandry. The Land Reform Bill might benefit from drawing on more modern pieces of legislation in this respect.

**In general**

The League is aware that the initial Government consultation considered whether or not entities registered outside the EU should be prevented from buying land in Scotland. We think it is regrettable that this proposal has been dropped, as it makes it easier to identify who is responsible in vicarious liability cases if the owner of an estate is an entity registered in the EU.

Legislation around wildlife crime, particularly vicarious liability, mean that legislation around land ownership and crimes against wildlife are more interlinked than they were at the time of the first Land Reform Bill since devolution. The League believes that wildlife crime is inherently at odds with sustainable development and it would have been beneficial to have seen references to wildlife in the Bill – at the moment there seems to be little discourse between the two policy areas.

However, we do think the Bill is generally positive and is a step forward.