Written submission from Peter Wang

Having barely digested the LRRG aperitif, this full instalment bears the hoofprint of another exercise in grandstanding and a warm-up act by the Scottish Government for 2016, distracting attention from more pressing issues. As ever, bristling with targets of “fairness” and “equality”. A wish list pandering to sundry minority pressure groups and the usual suspects, but still no definition of “sustainability”. If I read it out to my black Labrador she would bite me. A million acres into community ownership. WOW!

Without getting lost in this jungle of detail, one would have reservations particularly over the proposal to widen the line of succession to tenancies. Something which will only exacerbate the hiatus created in the letting of agricultural land by the referendum and the preceding years of uncertainty. Including, now, the aftermath of “neverendum”.

And the creation of yet more “Commissions”, with all of 6 commissioners, appointed at the whim of Ministers, plus civil servants to match, is merely another ploy to shield Government from the fall out when it all ends in tears. We have been here before and this is another proverbial sledgehammer to crack a nut. Over engineered and uncosted.

Experience to date of Community buy-outs has been decidedly mixed. The high hopes for the much publicised Gigha project appear to have lapsed into near bankruptcy and others are struggling. When interest rates start rising, these problems will intensify. And leave the hapless tax payer, as ever, picking up the bill.

Out here in the real world, land ownership and management in Scotland came through the worst recession since the 1930’s in astonishingly good shape. Operated as it is by innovative, enterprising and adaptable people from a wide range of backgrounds. With knowledge, experience and access to ample capital. The inflow from sources outwith Scotland probably exceeding £100 million annually. So, if the system ain’t broke, why spend unquantifiable sums of public money to fix it? This looks to be an exercise in futility, indulging the innate dislike by our current governing party of the 450 – odd individuals said to own 80% of the privately held land in Scotland. But almost without exception living up to the motto of leaving their land and heritable properties better than they found them. Whilst giving employment to myriad thousands. All in Scotland.

History records Land Reform as being also in the 1933 manifesto of another National Socialist party. In Germany, soon superceeded by sinister measures like genocide and ethnic cleansing. Comparisons are invidious, but the law here in Scotland of Vicarious Liability, which would raise eyebrows even in North Korea, may now be invoked in the recruitment of bin lorry drivers and to Police control rooms. It is an ill wind. ----.

The principal organisations and individuals will be making professionally prepared representations and will have facts and figures in place, but it is a fair assessment that ownership and management of land in Scotland is well funded and in capable hands.
Relations with local communities are strong and have stood the test of time, in many cases going back many centuries and beyond. We emphatically do not need lessons in social responsibility and empathy. The Scottish countryside is a happy place.

With the exception of a handful of well publicised cases, relations between landlord and tenant are at best cordial and rarely less than civilised. The Land Court is held in good esteem and functions well. The unleashing of complex legislation to fragmentise viable units, albeit that some are very large, to create yet more subsistence level small farms, as part of social engineering, looks doomed to failure. Clogging up courts which are already on over load.

There runs through this bill like a red thread that this Government assumes itself to have a brief from the much vaunted “People of Scotland” to avenge those Highland Clearances and to wreak vengeance on the few descendants of those held responsible for that dark chapter in Scottish history. Another exercise in populist manoeuvring and playing to a gallery largely absorbed with more urgent matters. Like the scandalous state of rural roads and the backlog of repairs and maintenance running to billions. Not to mention the horrendous problem (“challenge”) of litter and fly tipping, crying out for meaningful action and an outright ban. If our Rural Affairs Minister is still looking for a vision for the countryside, here it is. Right under his very eyes. Look at Newbridge.

And finally on a happier note, it will not have escaped the Committee that our biggest, and oft maligned, private landowner has got his retaliation in early by commissioning a magnificent landscape restoration project at a former open cast mining site in Upper Nithsdale. Currently much acclaimed and paid for with his own money. One hesitates to guess where this puts him on any Richter scale of “Responsible Landownership”, but an MBE might ensue? One of the few things he and his family may not yet have!

With best thanks for your consideration, and do try not to make those Greeks look too gifted!