Written submission from Peter Fairweather

Whilst I anticipate the comments you now seek are specific to the Bill I would like to preface my limited comments with some general observations on the ‘Land Reform’ debate which is in part prompted by Rob Gibson’s call for opinions. Although now retired I spent most of my working life in land management as a forester and factor and I care deeply about the importance of good and responsible land management.

Whilst I agree that a debate on the subject is important and I think the publication ‘The Land of Scotland and the Common Good’ is a useful survey I am much saddened by the covetous tone taken by many. It may be that relative to other nations in Scotland a few owners possess substantial areas of land. The important matter for discussion is not one of size but whether or not the land is well managed. The large ‘traditional estates’ which have been in the same ownership for, in some cases, centuries, have contributed significantly to the well being of Scotland. They formed much of our forest, agricultural and built heritage. They are able to provide viable land for let, they provide unique tourist attractions which can only be looked after if they are part of a large holding. By its unification of the Police Forces of Scotland the Scottish Government is clearly aware of the benefits of the economics of scale! Whilst there may be some cases where land buyouts can be a viable option I believe that it is premature to promote the on the current scale, the ‘jury is out’ on this fad as possible exhibited by Gigha. I consider that insufficient thought has been given to the continuity of management. Buy outs have inevitably been spearheaded by dedicated individuals but what happens when they wish to retire from their role and there are no willing successors. Common good, in my opinion, is more reliably served by ‘government ownership’ although as I pointed out in my letter of 7th August 2013 to Ms Blyth secretary of the Land Reform Group, their record is not unblemished! It is noteworthy that in spite of the 18000 or so crofts in Scotland, only a third have opted to buy since the right was granted in 1976. Not everyone wants to be an owner!

I turn now to the Bill and sections 6 and 8 – there is a relationship and it is not clear why these sections are separated by a section on common good land. Having been secretary of a deer management group for some 20 years from the date of their commencement I am surprised that no reference is made to the excellent voluntary work they carry out. I am not sure why the ‘local community’ needs to be involved, surely the composition of the DMG should cover this requirement. I do not understand why it is thought necessary to reintroduce ‘sporting rates’ for shootings and deer forests. I suspect they may cost as much to levy as they collect. Constituted Fishery Boards were exempt from rates and I would urge the Government to exempt areas covered by active DMGs so as to encourage good management. Since the repeal in 1994 the ‘right to roam’ has been introduced and I suggest this factor should be taken into account by the Assessor in fixing the rate.