



Mairi Gougeon MSP  
Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, Land Reform and Islands

**Via email**

September 20<sup>th</sup> 2023

Dear Ms Gougeon,

### **Land Reform for the Common Good**

In July 2023 The Jimmy Reid Foundation published '*Land Reform for the Common Good*', a discussion paper by Dr Calum MacLeod. The paper shows that despite successive governments' political rhetoric since devolution about the need to diversify Scotland's unusually concentrated pattern of large-scale private rural land ownership, mainly by encouraging more community ownership, that dominant pattern of private ownership remains virtually unchanged.

The paper highlights that, since 2016, the Scottish Land Fund has assisted in bringing just 0.1%, (11,943 hectares) of Scotland's rural land into community ownership. In contrast, 139,124 hectares of Scotland's rural land changed ownership in 2022 alone, with community purchasers conspicuous by their absence.

Recalling Jimmy Reid's legacy as a lifelong campaigner for social justice, Dr MacLeod's paper argues for a much more radical and integrated approach to land reform to tackle the climate and biodiversity crises, reverse rural depopulation, and achieve a wellbeing economy based on a fair sharing of Scotland's land wealth for the many, not the few. **That requires land reform to be recognised and repositioned as a distinctive area of public policy, cutting across Government portfolios in a strategic and increasingly interventionist way.**

The forthcoming Land Reform Bill offers an opportunity to begin that essential policy repositioning through its focus on a Public Interest Test for large-scale landholdings and related measures. '*Land Reform for the Common Good*' calls for **a minimum threshold of 500 hectares, including cumulative landholdings, as one criterion for what constitutes a 'large-scale' landholding**, rather than the Scottish Government's proposed 3000 hectares threshold. As Dr MacLeod notes, that 3000 hectares threshold is "*a figure set so high that it threatens to stall much of the forthcoming Bill's policy intent before it has even left the legislative starting blocks*".

The paper also calls for **the scope of the proposed Public Interest Test to be extended to include local infrastructure of community significance, such as piers, slipways, hotels, community facilities, or greenspace, to enable the Test to be applied to urban as well as rural contexts.**

We endorse these calls. It was therefore encouraging to hear the First Minister's commitment to "seriously consider" these calls following publication of *'Land for the Common Good'*. We also note that SNP President, Mike Russell, has publicly declared his support for a 500 hectares cumulative threshold, and to widening the scope of the Public Interest Test to include urban contexts.

Government and Parliament need to be bolder still on land reform: by introducing **land value taxation** to curb land speculation that effectively leaves communities' wellbeing priced out of the market; by **reforming succession law** to end the distinction between moveable and immovable property; and by **applying conditions to public subsidies** to ensure that land-based activities effectively serve the public interest.

*'Land for the Common Good'* also highlights other policy measures for inclusion in an integrated land reform programme. They include **simplifying the various Community and Crofting Community Rights to Buy** to make them easier for communities to use; **introducing compulsory sale orders over vacant or derelict land**; a role for **designated public bodies in purchasing land to transfer into community ownership**; **modernising the governance of common good land**; **establishing a community wealth fund** to support community-led local development in urban and rural communities; and **devolving ownership and governance of the foreshore**.

Scotland rightly aims to ensure a just transition to 'net zero' carbon emissions, and to establish community wealth building as the cornerstone of a wellbeing economy. To help meet these policy objectives the Scottish Government urgently needs to develop a radically progressive and integrated land reform programme connecting the nation's people and land in ways that safeguard the wellbeing of both; now and for the generations still to come.

**We therefore strongly support all of the above measures and urge Government and Parliament to implement them at the earliest opportunity as part of that envisaged integrated policy programme.**

The Jimmy Reid Foundation