



NEWS RELEASE

Use: Immediate

Date: 13/05/2024

SCF welcomes John Swinney and asks for more ambition in creating a fairer rural Scotland

The SCF has welcomed Mr. John Swinney to the role of Scotland's new First Minister. As the leader of the SNP minority government, Mr. Swinney has the opportunity to correct previous errors and to pursue a policy that will make rural Scotland including the crofting counties not only greener, but also fairer.

With his longstanding experience in Scottish politics, Mr. Swinney is well positioned to bring back the drive towards a better, fairer rural Scotland that accompanied the establishment of the Scottish parliament at the turn of the Millennium. At present, crofters feel they are being let down by current legislative proposals including the agriculture bill and the land reform bill.

The proposed agriculture bill is driven by the specific interests of one particularly powerful lobby group and has not much to offer for crofters and common grazings. There is a real risk that the measures introduced via the new tiered system will be pushing crofters over the cliff edge, effectively excluding them from any meaningful support, while further pouring public money into the pockets of the largest private landowners who do not need to be subsidised. As the bill is moving towards stage 3, there is still time for a change of track, introducing a system that truly supports crofters and other small producers, enabling a diverse and resilient agricultural sector focusing on agroecological and high nature value practices.

Crofters are, and have always been, stewards of the land they inhabit. They are already working in extensive, high nature value systems - and many are interested in championing nature restoration and biodiversity enhancement that goes hand in hand with traditional, low-intensive agricultural practices. Recent environmental policies, however, seemed to be geared towards quick and cost-effective gains, focusing on large-scale outside investment, rather than truly engaging rural communities who, instead, were subjected to patronising and ill-considered measures such as the unmitigated ban of wood-burning stoves.

The uncompromising push for green finance not only has raised concerns about making Scotland's rural communities complicit in greenwashing, but also adds further pressures on an overheated land market in a nation where land is extremely unevenly distributed. However, the proposed land reform bill, unfortunately, is toothless and will do nothing to address the highly concentrated pattern of landownership. Instead, it unhelpfully blurs landownership and land management while not meaningfully addressing either. Yet, Scotland's commitment to a just transition requires robust routes to changing landownership patterns which the principal means of shaping land use and management, through the ability to direct income generation and long-term decisions about land, including the creation of new crofts.

At this point in time, we are at a critical juncture: There is a real chance for Scotland to move forward, to become not only a greener, but also a fairer country and to enable a real just transition. Without significant course corrections, however, there is a risk that we cement the status quo or make things even worse, not least for Highland and Island communities, leading to further inequality and rural depopulation.

We trust that Mr. Swinney is able and willing to address present shortcomings and look forward to working with him towards a brighter future for all people in Scotland's crofting counties and beyond.

END