

NEWS RELEASE

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COMMITTEE REPORT ON CROFTING BILL IS EXEMPLARY - SCF

Praise for the Scottish Parliament and optimism for the future of crofting was expressed by the SCF this week following the publication of the report by the Parliamentary Environment and Rural Develop Committee investigating the Crofting Reform Bill.

SCF Chairman Norman Leask said, “We are very impressed with the report put together by the committee following their enquiry and the degree of unanimity among MSPs of all parties. The depth and quality of analysis of not only the legislative proposals but also of the underlying issues in crofting was apparent from early on in the process and has yielded excellent results. The Parliamentary Committee enquiry has succeeded where the Scottish Executive failed – in hearing and understanding the views put to them by crofters and others who value the crofting system. Maybe there is something in this democracy idea after all!”

The SCF have long been critical of the Executive’s lack of vision for crofting, on which to base any legislation reform. The Parliamentary Committee corroborate this and recommend that the discussions that they have initiated are continued and further changes made early in the next session.

The report recommends legislation be taken forward on a number of key issues for which there is widespread support – the creation of new crofts, more effective regulation of the crofting system and measures to deal with interposed leases.

Norman Leask again, “We have been consistently saying that the future of crofting has to be based on assessment of the current situation and a plan. For example, the opportunity to create new crofts and the better regulation of existing ones are measures which have to go hand-in-hand. There is no point in creating new crofts just to replace land

haemorrhaging out of crofting – as building sites, as large gardens round holiday homes or through neglect. This piece of inescapable logic seemed to escape the Executive and we are delighted that the committee has listened to the strength of depth of feeling in the crofting community on this issue. Croft creation, within a well-regulated system, offers real benefits both within the current crofting area and in other parts of Scotland. The debate on what this type of small-scale agriculture can offer is long overdue and we look forward to this discussion now being moved on.”

The Foundation has also highlighted that regulation of the system does not exist in isolation and is only one aspect of ensuring the survival of the system. According to Norman Leask, wider economic considerations have to be recognised and the Executive must back up this political endorsement of crofting with supportive rural development policies. “Only a tiny fraction of Scottish support to agriculture comes to the crofting areas”, said Mr Leask, “and it is a testament to the tenacity and resourcefulness of crofters that they are able to make a go of agriculture in the marginal areas where crofting is mainly located. We are calling on the Executive to ensure measures are in place to ensure that crofting land use is viable and properly supported for what it delivers for rural development.”

The report was cutting in its “astonishment” of the failure of the Crofters Commission to fulfil its statutory duty to compile an appropriate register of crofts and recommends that the cost of rectifying this is not borne by crofters. The Committee was also highly critical of the Commission failing to regulate the system effectively within the powers that are currently available to them.

Norman Leask again, “Obviously, the question of regulatory powers is not simple as the Commission undoubtedly does not have all the powers it needs – one of the reasons why legislation is necessary at this time - however the conclusions that they are not making full use of the powers available to them are in our opinion justified. This is the reason why the legislation must give the Commission a duty to use the powers at their disposal, albeit in a sensitive way and with some discretion. We look forward to being involved in

the continued discussions on the structure and role of the Crofters Commission which we assume will be supervised by an independent consultant and out of which we want to see an effective and consistent regulator which commands the respect of crofters.”

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Notes to editors

Picture can be found at: <http://www.croftingfoundation.co.uk/contact.shtml>