

Letter

Dear Mr Schellenberg,

A year ago we invited you to the press launch of the Isle of Eigg Trust and gave you a platform from which to say what you liked.

It was an amicable occasion. We were courteous to you. You were critical of our intentions, but decent enough to buy us all lunch afterwards. We were disappointed when you were later quoted in the press as saying you would not sell into community ownership, having joked that you could afford to buy us lunch in anticipation of the large sum of money you might be receiving.

Ideally we needed from you (there would have been no problem with Margeret Williams) an agreed price and fundraising timespan. However, in view of your remarks we have had to play our pitch not knowing where the goalposts were or how long until full time. You blew the whistle just 6 weeks ago. We have tried playing on injury time, but failed to score.

Our endeavour was on behalf of the human and ecological communities, though we are the first to acknowledge that you have been exemplary with respect to the latter. Our involvement was not to counter you personally, but to challenge the whole system of feudal Scottish land ownership, exemplified on Eigg, where life under one of your predecessors has been described by current residents as being "like living under enemy occupation".

At least with yourself back in the Lodge, people know the spread in what was otherwise a game of chance where they had not been dealt a hand.

Our endeavour, as you know because we sent you copies of all important documentation in good faith, was endorsed by 73% of the resident population in secret ballot. We also granted them power of veto over our actions. The Trust's aims received full politi-

cal support from Highland Regional Council, through the hard work of the Regional Councillor.

The socio-economic viability of community ownership was established in a feasibility study undertaken with funding through the Highlands and Islands Enterprise network.

An Open Letter of Beseechment to Keith Schellenberg, "Laird" of Eigg

The advice of many public, voluntary and corporate bodies was sought, as was that of poets, artists, writers, historians and traditional musicians. Even Sir Yehudi Menuhin said, "Is it not possible to find a way that the Eigg people can own their own homes?".

Notwithstanding all this. Notwithstanding all the newspaper headlines, radio interviews, TV slots, the subscriptions and prayers of ordinary folk and everything else – all this notwithstanding, you chose first to make things difficult for community ownership, and then, amazingly, to buy back the island through your holding company.

We ask you; we ask with emotions which are mixed but which are not soured so much as to be devoid of charity and a willingness to seek that which is noble in you: are you aware of what you have done? You are quoted in Harpers & Queen as saying: "Somehow it seemed more important to beat the Germans at Silverstone than to deal with a little Scottish island... I'm not worried if I don't win. I just don't want to lose".

Through wealth, you may have re-won the legal title to a little Scottish island. But you can never own an island's soul or that of the people who belong there. Soul, nothing less, is what stands to be lost in all this.

Whereas the title you have bought may be valid under post-1707 and 1745 legal constructs, please recognise that it has no moral authority whatsoever. Many of the people of Scotland would consider it to be bad title.

Bad title, because the land of the Highlands and Islands was not always a commodity to be bought and sold with reference only to Mammon. It was owned by the people, centred around clan chiefs of whom Lairdship is but a pale emulation.

Please, see it from our historical perspective. At around the same time as colonialism in the Third World was taking form, an alien cultural understanding was imposed on us. This included the market means of controlling land, control too often contrary to community interests.

It was at complete odds with the spiritual traditions of the area, exemplified in the book of Leviticus, that "Land must not be sold in perpetuity, for the land belongs to me" (Leviticus 25).

This usurpation, indeed conquest, of our culture and our place is maintained today by political authorities. We can only describe this as a cynical abdication by national government of the duty to safeguard the wellbeing of Highland communities and thereby enable full democratic expression. If you cannot readily engage in action to improve your community for fear of the Laird, you are not free.

That this charge is upheld is evident from recent remarks in the House. Lord James Douglas-Hamilton has said in response to a question about Gigha by Ray Michie MP on 4th June 1992, that sale of land "Is essentially a private matter... best served by the removal of anti-competitive rules... Ownership should be resolved within the framework of existing law. Land ownership is not a matter on which I have a

locus to intervene. However persuasive the hon. Lady is, I do not wish to adopt the mantle of paternalism in this matter."

Let us be unequivocal. Such a defence of Lairdship, the ultimate in paternalism, has only the veneer of a carefully schooled accent between it and the grasping rasp of today's robber-baron class.

Such remarks signify a cultural establishment quite out of connection with that literal Exodus, the Highland Clearances, perpetrated to consolidate bad title to the land. Do not forget that this was an Exodus of half a million of our people over the past 200 years. Some were driven out even by fire, or dogs, or bound and thrown into the emigrant ship holds.

And the consequences persist today. Witness not only Highland communities, but also the generational poverty of folk living in Scotland's urban areas of multiple deprivation.

The Clearances, let us remember, converted Eigg in less than 100 years from a self-sufficient community of nearly 400 souls with almost one thousand acres in arable cultivation, to a sporting estate with the 200 newly designated crofters housed at the north infertile end of the island and not even allowed to keep dogs. Between 1788 and 1790 alone, 176 people were cleared from Eigg.

We call for nothing less than the ownership framework which, where people wish, could permit a return from Exodus; a return in this era of ecological crisis from places of slavery to values destructive of humanity and nature.

In recognition of the gravity of these matters, the Isle of Eigg Trust hereby serves notice that it is now a Trust in Waiting. Go, look at the famous fossil beds on "your" island, and you will see where the bedlam in time ends in due course.

Our role is to wait, to monitor, and to serve as advocates if appropriate. Our strength is a simple willingness to speak truth unto power, through the media of the world if necessary.

You know, prophesy remains important in our culture. We hold fast to the prophetic concern that justice should roll on like a river. And we have our own prophets who witnessed to injustice.



We look this day to fulfillment of the hundred-year-old prophesy of Mairi Mhor nan Oran, Mary MacPherson, bard of Skye, who said: "When I am in my coffin my words will be as a prophecy. And there will return the stock of the tenantry who were driven over the sea. And the gentry will be routed, as they, the crofters, were. Deer and sheep will be wheeled away and the glens will be tilled. There will be a time of sowing and of reaping. And the cold, ruined stances of houses will be built on by our kinsfolk."

We feel present with our Highland communities today, as fresh as it was millennia ago, the hand of another venerated prophet who pronounced: "Woe to those who plan iniquity, to those who plot evil on their beds! At morning's light they carry it out because it is in their power to do it. They covet fields and seize them, and houses, and take them. They defraud a man of his home, a fellow-man of his inheritance" (Micah 2:1-2).

We know the true monetary value of Eigg. It is £15,000. We make a standing offer of this to you. That is what in 1828, having done his worst, Clanranald first sold Eigg for. And successive Lairds have had their return on capital. They have drawn it by leeching the

Earth and its people, or through riding proud on displaced social kudos.

No more must they enhance their sense of "being someone" by sucking out that life force which derives from the environment. Land, remember, is the bedrock and soil of Creation itself; the starting point from which we find purpose in glorifying and enjoying the wellspring of Creation forever.

Desist from fancied ownership. Make good this bad title, and be honoured for it.

If that is too much, then may your paternalism at least have benign effect. May you address as first priority the needs of the people and natural ecology of Eigg.

We wish all power and credit to your hand in so doing. And may your heart be warmed in the process.

These things, we beseech you.

Signed:

**Tom Forsyth,
Bob Harris
and Alastair McIntosh**

Trustees of The Isle of
Eigg Trust Scotland.
July 1st 1992.

Editorial note: In a discussion following a lively hour-long debate with Alastair McIntosh on Lesley Riddoch's BBC Radio Scotland "Speaking Out" programme (7.7.92), Mr Schellenberg agreed to meet in the autumn with the Trust, residents and representatives of public bodies to seek constructive ways forward for community development on Eigg.

Tom Forsyth is founder of the Eigg Trust and a crofter at Scoraig in Wester Ross, Bob Harris is a farmer and chairs the Lochwinnoch Community Council, Alastair McIntosh is Development Officer at Edinburgh University's Centre for Human Ecology.

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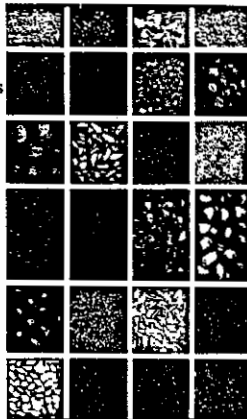
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