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Rennie, Frank

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“Celtic lands and identities: Global and Local Implications”

**The 2018 John F. Roatch Global Lecture on Social Policy and Practice,
Arizona State University, College of Public Service and Community Solutions
Phoenix, Arizona, USA, 23 March, 2018**

Professor Frank Rennie¹

The concept of “Think global, act local” is frequently attributed to the work of Patrick Geddes, a Scottish biologist, sociologist, philanthropist and pioneering town planner. He was an early champion of working with the environment, rather than working against it. The concept has since been applied to a very wide range of societal issues, but for today, I would just like to focus on its implications for local and national identity, in the recognition of a sense of place, and in determining a sense of responsibility for that place. I would then like to look at the social implications of that heightened sense of local and national identity.

There is a particular word in the Gaelic language of my homeland for which is difficult to give a direct translation into English. “*Buntanas*” expresses sense of belonging, now simply in the present, but the concept of a person or community of people belonging to a certain area of land, a communal sense of embeddedness, and rootedness through family lineage and history of a community who *belong* to a certain place. This is contradistinction to the more usual Western concept of the land belonging to an individual person, of people owning the land in its entirety.

In the poetry of the late Norman MacCaig¹, he asks...

*Who possesses this landscape? –
The man who bought it or
I who am possessed by it?*

I want to return to this theme in a few minutes, for I think that our relationships with the land is at the heart of the Celtic relationship with land and place. I have argued that it affects every element of our society, from the names that we give to places, to the way that we earn money, to the way that we feel about environmental issues, even to our basic civil rights as humans². But first I would like to explore the macro-political context of what we think of as “our land”. In particular, I would like to highlight the paradox of a nationalist Scotland, seeking political independence from England, yet a self-aware Scotland pursuing a future of closer collaboration

¹ Lews Castle College, University of the Highlands and Islands, Scotland, UK

with the countries of the European Union. I think that there is no coincidence that these aspirations are mirrored in the current politics of Ireland and Catalonia. I am sure that many of you in this room will be aware of the generalities of the recent history of the consecutive referenda on Scottish independence from the UK and on the Brexit split between the UK and the EU. Regardless of your political stance on these issues - and opinions span political parties - it must seem strange that on one hand the Scottish voters appear to be outwards-looking and internationalist in perspective towards Europe and the wider world, while at the same time being highly nationalist and inwards looking in attitudes towards England and the UK. I would suggest that snapshot looks at the issues in a very superficial context.

In the 2016 referendum on the future of the UK membership of the European Union, almost 52% of UK voters opted to leave the EU. The issues are far from simple or transparent, but concerns about EU legislative control over UK law, and the wish to have greater control over the freedom of movement and employment of non-UK nationals were strongly voiced in the political rhetoric. In contrast to the vote in England, the vote in Scotland was overwhelmingly to remain as a part of the EU: with 62% of the electorate in favour, covering every region of Scotland. This immediately raised tensions between the governments in Edinburgh and Westminster, and gave strength to the voice of people who have been campaigning for Scotland to become a self-governing nation – despite the vote in the 2014 Independence Referendum which was a narrow defeat for the independence campaigners (55.3% to 44.7%). Since that point, and following the subsequent Brexit referendum, there has been a marked rise in hate crimes and ethnic intolerance in England, and while Scotland has not been exempted, there has been noticeable publicity in Scotland, from individual citizens, businesses, and from the government, to stress that fellow-Europeans continue to be welcomed, and also from ethnic minority groups in Scotland to emphasise their commitments to Scotland and our national values. All of this has thrown the public discussion of identity – both personal and national – the sense of belonging, and the cultural and societal values of the citizens in different parts of the UK, into the media spotlight to an unprecedented level. This has been reflected not just as the abstract topic of academic speculation, but on the front pages of national newspapers and television channels. At the national and international levels, this drama is still being played out on the world stage, but the collective jolt to national politics has made this awareness acutely felt, right down to the level of individual communities and to individuals in those small communities. In this ongoing debate, Scotland has a special role in an international context, and within Scotland, and within the Highlands and Islands in particular, this historical moment presents a pivotal perspective on the values of our society.

So, let me return to the issues of land and belonging. This lecture is not a history lesson, but at the risk of superficiality, some basic historical facts are needed to properly understand this contemporary paradox.

Following the defeat of the Jacobite army in 1746, the Highlands and Islands of Scotland became the new frontier for internal colonialism. The Gaelic language was suppressed, and important Scottish cultural motifs, such as the wearing of tartan or the playing of bagpipes, were banned. *Clann* is Gaelic for “children” but over the following century, the leaders of the clan, who found themselves to be rich in natural resources, but cash poor, slowly removed ownership of the communal land from the community, into their personal ownership³. Over time, these clan leaders learned that sheep-farming and deer-hunting brought cash, and they welcomed that cash to allow them to emulate the lifestyle of their new rulers, so many of the new landowners forcibly removed much of the local population from their smallholdings, sometimes quite brutally⁴ in a manner that we would now unquestionably refer to as “ethnic cleansing”. Those new landowners became spiritually, ideologically, and physically distant from their roots and their extended families of the clan. This period, called “the Highland Clearances” has left a deep scar in many areas, which remains in the collective folk-memory to this day⁵. The architects of the clearances called themselves “Improvers” but the only thing they were attempting to improve was their own situation. This legacy has sometimes been called “the man on Scotland’s conscience”⁶ yet, due to the absence of this narrative from the history syllabus in British schools, many people even today are unaware of the details of this episode of persecution in the history of our own country. As the author George Orwell said “*Who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past.*”⁷

Fast-forward through the next two-hundred years, during which emerged the present form of rural settlement (called crofting)⁸ and land-use in the Highlands and Islands. This is a mixture of smallholding agriculture on extensive estates of largely open land which is frequently held in common by the crofting villages. Large areas of the region, which covers around 38% of the landmass of Scotland, are devoid of human habitation, and in rural areas, the main centres of population remain the small coastal villages which are often the sites to which the clearance generation was forcibly resettled.⁹ At the turn of the 20th century, many communities in the Highlands and Islands were little better than they had been 100 years previously. All of this changed with the First World War. There have been many books and articles written about the changes within society which the Great War brought about – how the role of women in the workplace began to change, how the socio-economic divisions within the population began to break-down and merge, how the big country houses and great estates were no longer viable and had to restructure their purpose and ownership. These changes, of course, have also been documented at the local level, as well as the national, and it is perhaps at this local level that the trauma and dislocation of that war is most painfully visible.¹⁰ It is hard to overstate the extent of the damage that the First World War did to my own community on the Isle of Lewis, the largest island of the Outer Hebrides at the furthest north-west edge of Europe.

“The Isle of Lewis had the highest proportion of its population serving [in the armed forces] in the First World War of anywhere in the British Isles. ... Lewis also had the

highest proportion of casualties: 17% of those serving died in the conflict; the ratio of deaths to the general population on the island was twice the national average.”¹¹

Over a brief few years, a whole generation of men – it was largely men – were removed from society, removed from their families, and removed from the possibility of contributing to the economy. To some extent, this legacy is still with us, for between the loss of life during the war, and the loss of population due to subsequent emigration, caused a ripple in the fabric of island society from which it has taken nearly 100 years to recover.¹²

When they went off to the war, the political recruiting slogans promised them “*A land fit for heroes*”¹³ – but the returning soldiers found that nothing had changed. Many villages were overcrowded, with poor housing, little paid work, and most importantly, no access to land on which to build houses, or to cultivate for food and income. There was no lack of available land, but it belonged to a landlord, and for most parts they had no intention of making any of this land available, even to returning servicemen. The land hunger of the previous century was still smouldering away, and in many locations, my own village included, this took the form of land raids. During the night, people would emerge from neighbouring townships and pull down the stones of the farm boundary walls to let the livestock escape to the moor; during the day, the farmers would recover their livestock and repair the walls. In some areas, the landless protesters would invade the landlord’s fields and state their intention to remain until the Government allocated parcels of land to them. Tensions rose.

In one contemporary account, there is an electrifying transcription of an encounter between landless protesters and Lord Leverhulme, who was at that time the owner of the whole of Lewis and Harris.¹⁴ He was a multi-millionaire industrialist, the founder of a company which is now a global corporation, and he had great personal plans to “improve” the condition of people on Lewis, whether they wanted it or not. In this classic confrontation, Lord Leverhulme, the wealthy landlord, is addressing a large crowd of disgruntled men who are landless, under-fed, and seeking to obtain the tenancy of new crofts - strips of bare, uncultivated land on which to work and feed their families. Leverhulme is very persuasive, with his eloquent language, and his promises of his vision for their future. An independent observer gave us a detailed account of this meeting, and from this account, one section stands out. It is a long quotation, but I think it is worth quoting in full, for it may give you an almost tangible appreciation for this clash of identities.¹⁵

Leverhulme is already addressing the assembled crowd.

“I have already thought out plans which will involve me in an expenditure of five million pounds! But there has been some discord between us: we have not seen eye to eye. When two sensible people have a difference of opinion they do not quarrel: they

meet and discuss their differences reasonably and calmly. That is what we have met for here today – and the sun is shining! But what do I propose to do with this five million pounds? Let me tell you”....

And then there appeared in the next few minutes the most graphic word picture it is possible to imagine – a great fleet of fishing boats – another great fleet of cargo boats – a large fish-canning factory (already started) – railways – an electric power station; then one could see the garden city grow – steady work, steady pay, beautiful houses for all – every modern convenience and comfort. The insecurity of their present income was referred to; the squalor of their present houses deftly compared with the conditions in the new earthly paradise. Altogether it was a masterpiece; and it produced its effect; little cheers came involuntarily from a few here and there – more cheers! - general cheers!...

And just then, while the artist was still adding skillful detail, there was a dramatic interruption.

One of the ringleaders managed to rouse himself from the spell, and in an impassioned voice addressed the crowd in Gaelic, and this is what he said:

“*So so fhiribh! Cha dean so gnothach! Bheireadh am bodach mil-bheulach sin chreidsinn oirinn gu'm bheil dubh geal 's geal dubh! Ciod e dhuinn na bruadairean briagha aige, a thig no nach tig? 'Se am fearann tha sinn ag iarraidh, Agus 'se tha mise a faighneachd [turning to face Lord Leverhulme and pointing dramatically towards him]: an toir thu dhuinnam fearann?*” The effect was electrical. The crowd roared their approbation.

Lord Leverhulme looked bewildered at this, to him, torrent of unintelligible sounds, but when the frenzied cheering with which it was greeted died down he spoke. “I am sorry! It is my great misfortune that I do not understand the Gaelic language. But perhaps my interpreter will translate for me what has been said?”

Said the interpreter: “I am afraid, Lord Leverhulme, that it will be impossible for me to convey to you in English what has been so forcefully said in the older tongue; but I will do my best” - and his best was a masterpiece, not only in words but in tone and gesture and general effect:

“Come, come, men! This will not do! This honey-mouthed man would have us believe that black is white and white is black. *We* are not concerned with his fancy dreams that may or may not come true! What we want is the *land* – and the question I put to him now is: *will you give us the land?*”

The translation evoked a further round of cheering. A voice was heard to say: “Not so bad for a poor language like the English!”

Lord Leverhulme's picture, so skillfully painted, was spattered in the artist's hand.”

In that wonderful account, we have encapsulated both the source of the dilemma and its solution.

The clash of identities between the “outsider” who thinks that s/he knows what is best for you, and the sense of identity of the person who wishes the right to self-determination, regardless of the rosy “alternative vision” of the outsider power.

This also encapsulates our heritage of democracy, and democratic decision-making at every level – the local, the regional and the national. The land raids continued, and within a few years Lord Leverhulme had departed Lewis and Harris forever. Many of the “raiders” eventually gained access to small plots of land, for the UK Government stepped in and created new crofts and new villages, with new, young families settling there. This includes my own village of Galson, where the farm was broken up and divided into 53 new crofts which were settled by lottery to landless applicants in surrounding villages. Many of those crofts now have multiple houses on them, as families have grown and built new homes close to their parents and siblings.

The Government in London was vividly aware of the history of previous land struggles in the Highlands and Islands, which had frequently only been quelled by the presence of soldiers, marines, and gunboats. This was a pattern which was becoming familiar in this newly emancipated world post-World War One, for this was the start of a period of decolonisation. With the growing unrest in Ireland, the Government took the decision that it was easier to buy-off these wild Islanders with small pockets of poor agricultural land, and then turn its attention to the more serious insurrection in Ireland, which challenged the right of imperial rule.

This was a period of decolonisation. The situation of an independent Irish state was resolved very quickly, and many other countries gained their political independence from the British Empire over the next 60 years. The situation in Scotland is still an ongoing issue. There are several key points that we can draw from the classic book “*Culture and Imperialism*” by Edward Said, where he notes that “*The slow and often bitterly disputed recovery of geographical territory which is at the heart of decolonization is preceded – as empire had been – by the charting of cultural territory.*”¹⁶ Further, that after the physical resistance to outside intrusion, “*there comes the period of secondary, that is ideological resistance, when efforts are made to reconstitute a shattered community.*”¹⁷ He argues that “*resistance, far from being merely a reaction to imperialism, is an alternative way of conceiving human history.*”¹⁸ Finally, his third idea of resistance, “*is a noticeable pull away from separatist nationalism towards a more integrative view of human community and human liberation.*”¹⁹ Yet although Said goes on to discuss the contribution of nationalist resistance in Ireland, nowhere in the book does he even mention the context in Scotland, far less address the position of the indigenous Scottish Gael. In

his epic analysis of the impact of imperialism on culture, the Highlands and Islands are airbrushed out of history.

Let me bring you almost up to date.

In 1999, as a result of popular campaigning, the Scottish Parliament was reconvened in Edinburgh, after being merged with the English Parliament in London for almost 300 years. One of the early actions of the reconstituted Scottish Parliament was to address the issue of land reform, particularly with regards to the crofting areas of the Highlands and Islands, which have, as we have seen, a historical legacy of contested²⁰ and highly emotive land ownership issues, right through to the present day.²¹ There has been an extensive contemporary dialogue on land reform in Scotland²² placing this regional debate in a national^{23&24} and an international context. In part, the debate has been centred on the political justification and process for enabling greater community responsibility in the ownership of land. The other part has focused on the mechanisms for funding the purchase of private land by communities, and the ongoing management of this land for the greater common good. The Land Reform (Scotland) Act, and its subsequent revision in 2016, has enabled a dramatic growth in the ownership and management of crofting estates by the communities who are resident on that land. Using both locally generated and external funds, over 70 communities throughout Scotland, many in the Highlands and Islands have now acquired the ownership of the land on which their own communities reside. This has been accompanied by a corresponding change in emphasis for management practices and local development agendas.²⁵

Where previously, many landed estates in the Highlands and Islands were viewed primarily as providing sport (shooting and fishing) for external guests, or for simply collecting croft rents, the new community-owned estates have based their business plans on the planned benefits and improvements for the local, resident community. The mutual-support organisation founded by these Land Trusts is *Community Land Scotland*, whose member Trusts now collectively own and manage around half-a-million acres of Scottish land, as well as many other community assets.²⁶ In the Outer Hebrides, it is calculated that around 60% of all land is community owned and around 85% of the population now live on community owned land. The main significance in legal terms is that the land-owning rights are transferred from a private owner to a non-profit-distributing company, owned by the community and managed through the democratic election by the members of that community. Land reform, as currently practiced in Scotland, is an attempt to create a more equal distribution of land ownership, and in effect it “*implies changes in the balance of power between the individual property owners, communities, and the state.*”²⁷ These are especially significant changes for the renaissance of local identity and the strengthening of local empowerment. Following the successes of the land reform activities to-date, the Scottish Government have made public their aspirations to have one million acres of Scottish land in community ownership by 2020.

Under the 1976 crofting Reform Act, crofters were enabled to purchase their land, but the long-established right of security of tenure has meant that the vast majority of crofters have chosen to remain tenants, paying an annual rent to a landowner. The popularity of community landownership initiatives, in contrast to the general lack of popularity of the crofters' pre-existing right to purchase their individual croft, can be seen as a confirmation of a belief in the collective power of ordinary citizens to influence effective local development, without, and this is important, without introducing new limitations to the individual's management of their croftland.

The significance of this quiet revolution in land ownership in the Highlands and Islands in some ways leads the world as an example of how communities can think globally and act locally, and here I come to my crucial lessons to be taken from this lecture.

The combination at this point in time of whole communities having access to the capital assets of the land that they walk on, build their houses on, and cultivate productively, together with the revenues that can be gained from the management of those land assets in the common good, is a game-changer of what we understand by the term "sustainable development". Like many other new concepts in our westernised media-society, "sustainable development" has become an overused phrase, which has subsequently lost much of its meaning and impact. There is a huge difference, however, in what the land is used for when it is managed for the collective benefit of the whole community, as opposed to the personal gain of one individual. It is no longer a priority to cut down timber, or to excavate minerals, or cull wildlife as fast as possible for short-term profit, because the collective vision wants to manage these assets in a long-term manner which will bring benefits not just to themselves, but to their children and grandchildren.

The establishment of these new community-owned and community-managed companies does not need to stop with the important but abstract concept of land ownership, however. These are commercial businesses, with elected Boards of Management, but their priorities can extend well beyond straight financial profit, although this is also one of their aims. These community-owned companies are providing a base from which to address a whole range of local and regional issues. For example, when the community owns the land, they are able to make house sites available to encourage young people to remain within the rural areas. They are able to make deals with building contractors and public authorities to enable the local provision of social housing and care facilities. Some Land Trusts have become sub-contractors for regional government services, such as the collection of domestic waste or the maintenance of piers and harbours. Ownership of the land offers possibilities to offer special incentives to attract new businesses to the area, and to re-invest commercial profits of the Trust in ways which most private companies would not consider.

The Land Trust in my own area has developed a six-figure annual income from the management of wind turbines (we are never short of wind in the Hebrides) and the profits from this investment are split three ways – the re-payment of commercial loans, the accrual of financial reserves for the parent company (the Land Trust) and a small fund which is being used to provide grants to local organisations for social, cultural, and environmental initiatives which can benefit the wider community. Local Land Trusts have provided the central point of focus for initiatives as varied as local tourism promotions, or the provision of exhibition space for photography and arts exhibitions. The Trusts have become the vehicle for some mainstream land-management practices throughout the region, such as hunting permits, vermin-control, and the removal of invasive plant species. Their role as “embedded intermediaries” – middle-ground organisations that are trusted by both official agencies and the grassroots citizens that they represent – have seen community land Trusts become closely involved with initiatives to reduce the horrendous fuel poverty of the region by funding house-insulation improvements for elderly residents, also in schemes to improve public health and welfare by sponsoring outdoor activities for young people and supporting the cost of membership of the local social-enterprise gym facilities for older people. There are numerous initiatives where the local Land Trust has stepped in to provide support, management, or ownership of several social operations in rural areas where the operation is not commercially viable, or not the direct responsibility of government, but yet provides an important social within the community, such as to keep open a rural shop, or a petrol station, public library, or community buildings. Many of these Land Trusts are located in beautiful, scenic areas, and local people are keen to see their environment protected and managed for the benefit of local residents as well as for visitors to the region. The Land Trust is becoming a new level of enthusiastic local democracy, acting both as a place where the individual citizen can voice their views on local issues, and which outside organisations – from local and national government to corporate business and investors – can consult directly with the grassroots. In general, left-wing politicians like the model because it brings social benefits to the whole community, and right-wing politicians like it because it encourages entrepreneurial thinking and new business start-ups. It is the single most important initiative to enable and empower communities to assert their independence and to take local control of issues which government finds difficult or impossible to manage cost-effectively or logistically. Community-owned Land Trusts are providing a platform to both stimulate and support local development initiatives through reinforcing the importance of local identity in decision-making.

So, how does this newly developing local identity relate to the macro-politics of Scottish political independence and Brexit? Quite simply, it is a matter of enhanced local identity boosting self-esteem, encouraging independent thought, and fostering a growing self-belief and self-confidence. People learn about democracy by acting democratically, they learn the benefits and pitfalls of business by engaging in initiatives to foster economic regeneration. When these economic activities have social as well as financial objectives, there is a greater public gain. Scotland has a different legal system from England, differing religious beliefs, and a long

heritage of different systems for school education, the management of universities, and the public health services. These different systems cascade downwards to the very lowest level of the individual citizen, and the belief in these values, together with the growing awareness of self-identity and self-belief, is producing a confident, outward looking society. It was very noticeable that the vast majority of younger voters were in favour of Scottish political independence and yet also a stronger affiliation with our neighbouring countries of the European Union than the more cautious over-65's, with their historical recollections of war, economic depression, and government dependency. These younger generations are looking out into the world with a pride in their local identity, a self-worth, and an understanding that they face many of the same challenges as young people in other countries – and that they are no less able to face-up to meet these challenges effectively. There is a clear connection between a vibrant, self-determining local identity and a confident but tolerant civil society in the nation.

Many years ago, I gave a lift to an old colleague to a crofters meeting on the far north coast of Scotland. After the meeting we were leaning on a wall, looking over a field of fine sheep, when a local man asked my colleague where he came from. My colleague gave the name of a small, very rural glen many, many miles away. Immediately, the local man began to quote a verse or two of a song in Gaelic about the glen of my colleague, though the local man could not converse in Gaelic at all, and had never been to visit this glen. He had learned the song as a boy at school and committed it to memory. On the drive home, my old colleague leaned over and said that that was the difference between thinking that the land belonged to you and realizing that you belonged to the land. That is *buntanas* – a sense of belonging.

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