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<http://www.counterpunch.org/2016/08/17/we-know-who-owns-britain/print/>

## We Know Who Owns Britain

By Julian Vigo

August 17, 2016

In 2014 the Scottish government announced a land reform programme, aptly named 432:50–Towards a comprehensive land reform agenda for Scotland to reflect the fact that 432 people own 50% of the land in Scotland. And this report is worth readings as it is an indictment of the pervasive obstruction of information linking which parts of British aristocracy own what and the disparity in wealth affecting this country:

*Inequality in wealth is an increasing concern internationally. Debate about the causes and consequences of inequality has focused, in the UK and elsewhere, on the divide between the ‘one per cent’ (who hold a large and growing proportion of available wealth) and the ‘ninety-nine per cent’ (whose share of total wealth has been falling). The inequality inherent in Scotland’s land ownership pattern, however, is of an entirely different order to the more general 1:99 divide. The disparity in this instance is not between one hundredth of the population and the other ninety-nine hundredths. Setting aside the complex ownership structures many owners have put in place (below) in order to obscure or conceal aspects of their ownership, **the divide is between the equivalent of one twelve-thousandth part of the population (the part owning half of Scotland’s privately-owned land) and the remainder.** [emphasis mine]*

And if this was not condemnation enough of the greed rife throughout the country’s land ownership, Conservative MEP (Member of the European Parliament) Struan Stevenson estimates that Scotland’s wealthiest landowners will net around £1 billion from rental charges levied on wind farms which, he underscores, only exist because of public subsidy. What the United States

government did to bail out Wall Street, the British people have been doing for centuries for its elite, acting against their own interests. The question we must all ask now, is why?

First, the 432:50 paper set out a compelling case for the need for land reform in Scotland and the equally important need to register who owns the land since the Registration Act of 1617 which created the Register of Sasines did not make land registration compulsory. And by the early twentieth century, Scotland moved from a system of recording deeds to that of registering titles which was assisted by the 1979 Land Registration Act. “The Land of Scotland and the Common Good,” the final report which 432:50 instigated, came out in May 2014 and this was followed up in November, 2014 with the First Minister, Nicola Surgeon, announcing plans to establish an accountability for Scotland’s land which must be an asset “that benefits the many and not the few.” Initially announcing twelve legislative proposals, by 2015 “A Consultation on the Future of Land Reform in Scotland” proposed to give powers to ministers to intervene where the scale of land ownership or the conduct of a landlord was acting as a barrier to sustainable development; to establish a Scottish Land Reform Commission; to improve the transparency and accountability of land ownership; to ensure charities holding large areas of land were under an obligation to engage with local communities; to remove business rates exemptions for shooting and deerstalking estates.

The Land Reform Bill was finally passed by the Parliament on 16 March of this year and received Royal Assent on 22 March, 2016, but by and large the bill was what many described as “underwhelming.” While the new legislation subsumes protections for tenant farmers and the end to tax relief for sporting estates and a new Scottish Land Fund with £10m available to help community buy-outs, the other promised amendments never made it through: the restriction of the amount of land that one individual can own; the prevention of land ownership through offshore tax havens; and the creation of a public register of landowners throughout Scotland. But even with this bill falling short of more radical change, Scotland is light years ahead of England and Wales on this matter.

For throughout its history, Britain has been the welfare state for capital. And just as Americans were quick to point to the US government’s bailout of its elite class in 2008 while homeless line the streets, today we see that the elite in the United Kingdom are able to hold onto their wealth primarily through the obfuscation of information and the control of media. Indeed, should the masses learn how much the very few elite of this nation actually own, many would likely take to the streets in protest. The same secrecy surrounding who owns Scotland’s land exists south of the border as well, and such secrecy must be removed in order for meaningful land reform to take place.

Now that Gerald Grosvenor, the 6th Duke of Westminster, has passed away, his son, the twenty-five year old Hugh Grosvenor, has taken the helm of what some media outlets inaccurately describe as “half of London.” More accurately the 7th Duke of Westminster now owns 300 acres of central London between Mayfair and Belgravia as well as 133,000 acres in Scotland, Lancashire and Cheshire. In total, the wealth that Grosvenor has inherited between property and other assets is estimated to be £9bn. All this while housing is scarce in London, all this while homelessness rises to record levels as 2015 government statistics show that 3,569 people slept in the rough while local agencies report that 8,096 people slept rough from April 2015 through

March 2016, double the rate of 2010. Equally as daunting, 114,790 households in England, 14,160 in Wales, and 34,662 in Scotland applied to their local authority for homelessness assistance in 2015-2016.

All this while a huge chunk of the £9bn inheritance will not be subject to death duties—only a periodic tax and income from these assets is likely to be subject to tax due the inheritance being part of a complex trust arrangement. Ah, the travails of the rich and famous!

Meanwhile, the elite of the United Kingdom might believe that obscuring land ownership titles will keep them from being held accountable for the growing poverty in the country, the reality is that everyone knows who they are.

And yes, Hugh Grosvenor, we are looking directly at you.