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Common Weal Policy

**BETTER THAN THIS: EIGHT IDEAS
SCOTLAND SHOULD BE TALKING
ABOUT IN THIS ELECTION**

COMMON WEAL



Common Weal is a Scottish 'think and do tank' which promotes thinking, practice and campaigning on social and economic equality, participative democracy, environmental sustainability, wellbeing, quality of life, peace, justice, culture and the arts.

Common Weal is entirely funded by small donations from members of the public and is entirely independent of any political party. It is governed by a Board drawn from across the spectrum of progressive politics in Scotland.

Common Weal also runs a news analysis service called Source and has a network of autonomous local groups who seek to put Common Weal ideas into practice in their communities.

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CONTENTS

4	Introduction
4	Resilient Recovery
5	Green New Deal
5	A New Democracy
6	National Care Service
7	Land Reform
7	Housing Revolution
8	Taking Control of our Energy
9	Better Banking
9	Beyond Devolution: Getting Independence Right

INTRODUCTION

The Scottish Election is upon us, but sometimes it feels like the nation's political debate has been about anything except the big policy ideas that we should be debating. Scotland is better than this; we are a country which is rich with groups and individuals thinking big thoughts about our future and Common Weal is only one of them. But we have produced an enormous amount of inspiring policy work since the last Holyrood election and together it paints a picture of a Scotland that truly is better than it is now.

This paper simply sets out eight of the big ideas we think Scotland should be talking about in this election and gives details of the wealth of policy papers which build up these ideas (which can all be found at www.commonweal.scot in the policy library). We hope you find it inspiring.

1. RESILIENT RECOVERY

Scotland, like most of the world, is facing an economic crisis in the aftermath of Covid – though the fundamentals of a lot of that crisis were in place long before the pandemic. We need to change our economy if we want to tackle inequality, poverty and insecurity. But it's not just about fixing the social ills that our current economy creates, it's about building an economy for the future which benefits everyone, creating jobs that pay better and help us feel good about our work because we are doing useful things – growing, making, building, serving. And it's about an economy that strengthens rather than undermines the things we value like community, democracy, wellbeing – and of course our environment.

So how do we do it? First we need to change the nature of our economics. For far too long we have valued our economy only in terms of how quickly it grows and not in terms of what it delivers for us. We have narrowed down the economic tools that we use to a tiny number and it is these which are doing the damage. But there is a wealth of better economic thinking out there and a host of different economic tools which can be used. We need a new economics.

Second, we have got to stop believing that 'markets know best' and challenge the idea that standing back and leaving well alone will produce the best outcomes. It will certainly produce the best outcomes for some, but not for the public good. This approach is what led to so much inequality. We need to make judgements about the kind of economy we want and we need to take steps to encourage not just any kind of economy but *that* kind of economy. There are lots and lots of ways to do that, but when you put them together in a plan it's known as an industrial policy. That's what Scotland needs – a green industrial policy to change our economy for the benefit of everyone.

Finally, we need to achieve a more resilient economy. The UK economy, like much of the world's economy, is constantly suffering crises big and small, and every time it does it creates more pain for those already suffering the most and drags more people into insecurity. And Covid is only a foretaste of the kinds of shockwaves ahead resulting from the environmental crisis. We have been living like we can just keep surviving by importing much of what we need from far away and crossing our fingers that it'll be OK. This is a mistake. We need to produce much more of what we consume here in Scotland and to the highest standards. We need to have many more Scottish businesses producing what we consume so we're not wholly reliant on a tiny number of mega-corporations. And we need a much more balanced economy so that if there is a downturn in one sector, other parts of the economy can pick up the strain. Building up Scotland's industrial base should be a priority.

A new economics based on resilience delivered through an industrial strategy is not just about theory, it's about making a real difference to people's lives. All of the above will move the economy from being based on low-skill, low-pay insecure service sector jobs towards high-skill, high-pay secure jobs based on growing, processing and manufacturing (and the supply chains and professional services these jobs need). It is not only those at the bottom of the pay scale that benefit – everyone benefits.

Find Out More

There are two main Common Weal reports where you can find out more about all of this

– **Resilience Economics** and **Resilient Scotland** (which is in three parts). They explain in detail all the steps needed to achieve the above.

2. GREEN NEW DEAL

The environmental crises are the greatest threat facing humanity and we need to tackle them with much more urgency than the way we're tackling them just now. But far from being a terrible burden on our generation it is in reality a massive opportunity. The actions that we need to take to redress humanity's impact on the environment can be combined with a major industrial strategy to create jobs and transform our society in a way that pays for the work we need to do through virtuous economic growth. Put together these have become known as a Green New Deal.

The list of what we need to do is long. We have to insulate our housing and other buildings properly and replace the gas most of us use for heating. We need to replace the remaining non-renewable electricity generation and convert our transport system away from petrol and diesel. We need to change how we use our land so it stops emitting carbon and instead absorbs it. We need to find a much better way to use all our resources through a circular economy, and we need to stop using single-use plastic altogether. We need to look at the harm done by the things we consume and by the way we live our lives. And we need to do all of this with urgency.

Scotland does not have the powers to achieve all of this but it does have all the powers it needs to get ready, to get all the preparation done so we can start our transition properly. And there is more than enough which Scotland does have the power to do that we can get on with properly. The crucial thing is to design and manage it properly so that it creates the prosperity which means the work pays for itself and ordinary people don't need to put their hand in their pockets to pay for the work that needs done. It is all possible – if we have courage and vision.

Find Out More

Common Weal produced the first comprehensive, costed Green New Deal anywhere in the world. Called the **Common Home Plan** it explains how to do everything that we need to do to shift Scotland's environmental foot print not to net zero but to net environmentally-positive.

3. A NEW DEMOCRACY

There is a lot of talk about a crisis of democracy in the western world – so let's take it head-on in Scotland and revitalise our democracy for the 21st century. Let's create a democratic system which makes ordinary people powerful, is responsive and lets people shape their communities, holds power to account and changes our society in the ways our citizens want.

But first we need to catch up with the rest of the world. Scotland has the less local democracy than anyone else in Europe – by miles. We have the biggest councils which bundle the largest number of citizens and result in the fewest members of society actually standing for election. Time and again surveys and consultations have shown that people want more power in their communities but progress towards that has been glacial. We need a proper system of really local democracy with councils which can be held to account by communities and which are focussed on developing the paces where people live for the better.

From there we can be innovative and bold. Common Weal led Scotland in calling for a Citizens' Chamber, a second chamber of the Scottish Parliament made up of people selected at random from across Scotland. These 'citizen politicians' would not be controlled by political parties and would return to their normal lives after their term was over so wouldn't be in it for money, power or fame but would have the power to hold the Scottish Parliament to account, shape legislation and do big thinking of its own. The idea was taken up and supported by Scotland's first Citizens' Assembly, a hundred ordinary people chosen at random to think about and provide advice on Scotland's future. It seems it's what citizens want – so let's do it.

Then let's do our policy-making differently. The world has moved on from rooms of bureaucrats getting together with vested interests in a room and deciding how ideas are going to be shaped and implemented. We have a wide array of new decision-making tools which include many more people in how decisions are made and ideas shaped. Together they are known as participative and deliberative democracy and they have all been well tested and extensively used. We should integrate them into every aspect of decision-making in Scotland.

Finally, let's look at governance. Scotland has an extensive network of government bodies and agencies and they are all overseen and guided by some form of governance. But that governance is almost always drawn from a pretty narrow spectrum of senior public and private sector professionals and are seldom democratic. There are other, better ways to govern public life – so let's use them.

Find Our More

Common Weal consulted with lots of partners to create a detailed model for a new form of local government in Scotland which was published as [Development Councils: a proposal for a new system of local democracy in Scotland](#). The proposal for a second Citizens' Chamber for the Scottish Parliament was published jointly with the Sortition Foundation as [A Citizens' Assembly for the Scottish Parliament](#) and our proposal for how to reform governance and implement participatory and deliberative democracy can be found in [Agenda for Pioneering Open Government: a Common Weal contribution to the Open Government Programme](#).

4. NATIONAL CARE SERVICE

Scotland does not lack social problems, from the unacceptable number of children who are drawn into the care system to the shameful statistics on drug deaths to the horrific death toll in our elderly care homes. In Scotland we treat these problems as separate issues to 'firefight' and we wait for problems to arise before we tackle them. There is now momentum for a National Care

Service in Scotland to match our National Health Service, but at the moment it looks like it will be little more than tinkering with what is already there and then rebranding it.

We could be so much more ambitious than that. If we began seeing that care and caring relationships are integral to life, that everyone has inherent potential that can be realised through care and that everyone is valuable and resourceful and can make a meaningful contribution to their wider community if we find ways of including them. If we thought of care provision as being about supporting wellbeing, learning and growth and if we made this a fundamental part of a genuine National Care Service it could be revolutionary. Instead of waiting for things to go wrong and paying the expensive price of trying to pick up the pieces we could create a system which, from pre-birth to end of life, was there to support and help people when they needed it we could prevent the problems from happening in the first place and save the cost of trying to fix them.

This would be a genuinely 'womb to tomb' service. Before birth it would help and support parents to provide happy, nurturing, stable environments for their children. Throughout life it would be embedded in communities, working to prevent our social problems from arising. And towards the end of life it would offer high-quality humane care for those who need it. All this would be a public service in public ownership.

It would not only transform lives, it would transform Scotland.

Find Our More

Common Weal has a Social Care Group which is working on this big thinking right now and we will publish it soon. But some is already published. Our breakthrough report on the Covid crisis in care homes sets the scene - [The Predictable Crisis: why Covid-19 has hit Scotland's care homes so hard](#). We made a submission to the [Review of Adult Social Care](#) which explained what's wrong and published a [Manifesto for a National Care Service](#) setting out the principles that should underpin it. And [Struggling to Care: why Scotland need to reform the role of social workers](#) is an analysis of how social work has

been degraded in Scotland and how it could be revitalised and made a core part of a National Care Service.

5. LAND REFORM

Scotland's land is owned by a remarkably small number of people – half our land in the hands of fewer than 500 landowners. But this is more than a social justice issue. Much of that land is needlessly unproductive and poorly managed so does environmental harm. And it just doesn't create anything like as many jobs as it should. So instead of being an asset which helps Scotland fight the climate crisis, support communities, create good livelihoods and provide a nourishing home for Scotland's wildlife our land almost does the opposite.

First we have to tackle ownership. Centuries of history have resulted in the concentrated and distorted ownership patterns of land in Scotland and that ownership measurably leads to a whole range of economic, environmental and social issues. It has always been argued that it is impossible or illegal to do anything about it, but that's not true. All the tools needed to diversify ownership of Scotland's land are in the hands of the Scottish Parliament and using them would be perfectly legal. It could lead to a Scotland where it is normal for ordinary people and communities to own land, as investment or for a business, or for housing.

Then we just need to imagine that land differently. We assume that the barren moors and hillsides of Scotland are 'natural' – but they're not. They've been made that way by years of tree-felling, over-grazing, burning, poor soil management and other human interventions. There is no need for them to be these 'wet deserts'. They could be a half-wild mosaic of life – commercial and non-commercial forestry, rewilding, livestock farming, ecotourism, energy generation, new home building and more. All of this can drive Scotland's rural economy and provide supply chains for the Green New Deal we need.

And if we do it could be transformative. Almost any use creates more economic impact than

the grouse moors and vast sheep grazing we have, both of which we must move away from anyway. It would unlock the economic potential of rural communities and potentially create tens of thousands of jobs. And of course land reform isn't only about the countryside – it can transform our towns and cities too.

Find Out More

Common Weal has published lots on land reform. The key document is [Our Land: a vision for land reform in Scotland and how we get there](#), written jointly with the New Economics Foundation and commissioned by the Revive coalition for grouse moor reform. They were also partners in [Back to Life: visions for alternative futures for Scotland's grouse moors](#) (written with Lateral North) and [Work the Land: the employment potential of land reform](#). The role of land in a Green New Deal is covered in [The Common Home Plan](#) and the description of a different future for Scotland's uplands is in [A Mosaic of Life: a vision for reforming Scotland's uplands](#).

6. HOUSING REVOLUTION

Scotland's houses have risen in price much faster than people's incomes. But they haven't got bigger (we still have a comparatively small average house size) and the energy performance which makes them cosier but also prevents climate crisis has improved very slowly and nowhere near enough. And renting is increasingly insecure for tenants.

It doesn't need to be like this. A strong partnership with the Scottish National Investment Bank offering long-term, mortgage-style lending would make financing new housing much easier. And if this is combined with Land Value Capture (where the public buys land at its current price, not the price it would be worth after planning permission) it would mean that new public rental housing would not require any subsidy at all – even for houses with the incredibly environmental performance of a passive house. And not only would the houses not need subsidy they would be much more affordable – a house that currently costs about £1,400 a month to rent,

heat and maintain would now cost more like £820 a month. However many people wanted top-quality, affordable, cosy and spacious houses available as secure rental housing – Scotland could build that many of them, and it wouldn't require any taxpayer cash.

This would help to control Scotland's house price rises – our housing can't keep rising in cost faster than people's salaries or an entire generation is going to be priced out of housing. And Scotland's Council Tax is unfair, outdated and must be replaced. Replacing it with a simple Property Tax which would be based on the current value of the house would leave 80 per cent of people better off and help to control house price rises (and be cheaper to administer too). It would also tax land which would help with land reform, which in turn would help provide more land for housebuilding, particular for rural communities which desperately need it.

This does not mean existing householders should be left behind. On the contrary, we need to get absolutely all of Scotland's housing stock up to the best environmental performance levels possible with a Green New Deal. If it is done properly it means no-one has to pay to improve their own house and the jobs it would create could mean it would pay for itself. Nor should current renters be left behind. They need the support and security which would be provided by proper rent controls.

And there are enormous economic opportunities too. Scotland imports most of its construction materials from abroad and there is no need for this. From cellulose insulation to powerful 'cross laminated timber', Scotland could use its forestry resources to produce the construction materials for so much of its new housing, locking up carbon, creating lots of jobs and making for beautiful houses.

Find Out More

The model for subsidy-free housing is set out in [Good Housing For All](#) and Land Value Capture is explained in [Public Land Value Capture: a new model for housing development in Scotland](#). How to replace Council Tax is explained in [A Property Tax for Scotland: replacing the Council Tax and taxing land](#). The model for insulating existing homes is set

out in [The Common Home Plan](#) and the detail of how to do it is contained in a soon-to-be-published new paper. [The Rent Controls Scotland Needs](#) explains how those can be introduced and the vision for boosting domestic construction material production is contained in both [The Common Home Plan](#) and [Resilient Scotland](#).

7. TAKING CONTROL OF OUR ENERGY

Scotland's potential for renewable energy is world-leading – but we aren't yet making the most of it. We need to move faster to decarbonise our heating and electricity and we need to do it in a way which boosts Scotland's economy.

To plan all of this we should set up a Scottish Energy Development Agency (SEDA) to produce the detailed plans and policies to make it happen. It should oversee our rapid transition away from carbon-based energy and it should make public ownership of as much of that energy as possible and capturing the jobs from energy technology manufacturing priorities. To achieve both of these things we should also set up a Publicly Owned Energy Company to own the generation capacity and commission the technologies. It could even sell electricity directly to customers.

Scotland's renewable energy needs can be met through onshore and offshore wind alone, which leaves our enormous marine energy resources still available for development. The world is going to need lots of green hydrogen for all sorts of reasons and green hydrogen is the produce of spare renewable energy. This puts Scotland in an outstanding position to take a lead in that industry and make sure that we don't lose out on those jobs like we did with oil and gas and the first generation of wind energy.

But this doesn't fix Scotland's heating energy issues and they're much more difficult to resolve. By far the best solution is a district heating system based on renewable heating sources such as solar thermal and heat recovery. This stores the heat in big reservoirs and then

distributes it to houses when they need it through a network of hot water pipes. This is expensive to put in place – but so is any other solution to heating. And Scotland doesn't have the financial powers under devolution to do it – but there is a long lead time to get everything ready and that can be done under devolution. The National Energy Company should be tasked to get this work prepared and the SEDA to plan it.

Find Out More

Common Weal's energy team has published too much material to list it all here but key documents include [Just Warmth](#) and [Carbon Free, Poverty Free](#) but the easiest way to get the full picture is [The Common Home Plan](#) and how we can get everything ready under devolution is explained in [Resilient Scotland](#).

8. BETTER BANKING

All over Scotland communities are being cut off from banking services – and of course in recent years the banks have hardly covered themselves in glory. In most other countries there is a mixed banking system with mutuals, publicly-owned banking and large credit unions. But in Britain the market is almost entirely dominated by a small number of commercial banks. That doesn't need to be how we do it.

We could restore branches to communities all over Scotland and create a secure, trustworthy, customer-focussed banking network which is set up publicly but then becomes a mutual, owned by its customers. There is a model of a 'bank in a box' which has everything needed to create a new, mutual retail bank and this would be the starting point. As soon as it is launched it is driven by customer demand – any community that gets enough customers can get a full bank branch with staff and the full range of services. Those which can't quite get enough customers or which are smaller can get 'bank pods', automated branches about the size of a large container unit that can be put anywhere but would provide the full range of services (and would have special video conferencing

facilities so even services like meetings with mortgage advisers could be done where you live).

This banking network would then provide the full range of banking services you'd expect but focus on the wellbeing of customers and on building long-term, supportive relationships with small businesses.

Find Out More

The whole plan for this is set out in [Better Banking: a public-good banking network for Scotland](#).

BEYOND DEVOLUTION – GETTING INDEPENDENCE RIGHT

All of these are policies which can be implemented by the Scottish Parliament with the powers it has now. But Common Weal continues to believe that to really achieve its potential it needs all the additional powers that come with independence. We do not need to wait to prepare for that and we shouldn't – making independence work means preparing really well for it. There will be an enormous amount of work to do if Scotland votes to become an independent country and getting the details right really matters. The earlier we start, the better the job we will do of independence.

We should set up a National Commission to get this work done well in advance of an independence referendum, or at least get it started and do as much as possible if there is an early referendum. And we need a strategy for getting that referendum because we may not find Westminster eager to concede one.

Find Our More

The full, detailed plan for what needs to be done to start Scotland as an independent country and how to do it is set out in [How To Start A New Country](#), and a strategy for getting a referendum is proposed in [Within Our Grasp](#).