

## **Winston Churchill – address to ADMG AGM 2018**

When Richard asked me to say a few words today, I did explain that public speaking was not one of my strong points so please bare with me! However, I did accept as I feel that the deer world is going through a time of change in many ways and this is a good opportunity and a good forum to air thoughts!

With my name and accent, I feel somewhat as an imposter within the highlands so I thought it best if I give you an insight into my background and how it all happened for me!

I was born in Essex – yes Essex and they say that you can take the boy out of Essex but not the Essex out of the boy so that is not a great start – it does get better!! Father was a gamekeeper and from an early age, all I wanted to do was to follow in his footsteps – I left school at the earliest opportunity at the ripe old age of 15 in 1966 – the year when England won the world cup – I thought that I should mention this in light of Scotland's recent success in the Calcutta Cup!!

During 1968 we moved to Northamptonshire to work as gamekeepers on an estate near Corby. My employer who was the country squire and an aristocrat, loved highland red deer stalking – stags of course. He had a very good friend called Marcus Kimble who invited him for stag stalking at Altnaharra year on year. I was invited to go to help ghillie – in truth it was a busman's holiday and very kind of my employer to give me the opportunity. I did this for ten consecutive years and completely lost my heart to the highlands. For a young man who had never seen anything but flat fields, roads, towns and house, it was awesome and I wanted some of it! As a result, a friend and I would take a week hind stalking each year – we went to a number of different estates across the highlands – it was the highlight of our year!

At the time an old uncle of mine had connections with a senior manager within Economic Forestry Group based at Sandbank, near Dunoon – the company was better known as EFG and was eventually merged with Tillhill. I am quite sure that many of you will remember that company? As a result of the connection, our stalking holiday's extended to EFG at Dunoon. My affection for game keeping was waning due to modern serial farming methods which was not conducive to wild game management and commercial game shooting had crept in, which was completely changing the game management world that I grew up in and quite frankly, I wanted out!! By complete contrast, I could see that the creation of plantations/forests in the southern highlands was the complete opposite – there was a huge change going on which opened opportunities to work in a truly wild environment and with truly wild creatures!!

This was for me and the opportunity came during 1983 when I applied a position in the wildlife department of EFG, based at Dunoon on the Cowal peninsular – I was offered the post and accepted. I moved north on the 26 April with all my possessions – clothing, guns and dogs – packed into my ford Capri to start this new life! I worked for EFG for five years – over those years, I met and married a local girl - then following the changes due to the closure of tax benefits to forestry investors, my wife and I started the business that we still run today.

From this little story, you can see that I have had very limited experience of Highland, open hill stalking but I have almost 35 years experience within forestry stalking. During those years, I have seen many changes. Initially the young plantations offered a fantastic habitat for roe deer but slowly but surely the habitat declined for them, however the red deer took over and have colonised all forests on Cowal – also as a matter of interest they have now colonised the island of Bute which had no red deer until approximately 15 years ago.

I am 67 years old this year and with the very best will, I am now realistically approaching the end of my working career and maybe I am slightly cynical in my old age but I see challenges ahead for the next generation and I would like to raise two points today which I see as controversial issues that should be addressed if possible. Both subjects are related.

1. Sporting rates - we rent approximately 12,000 ha from a number of different landowners – all linked to commercial forestry in the private sector. Each property would fall beneath the SBBS threshold but collectively they put me in a situation whereby I am likely to be asked for upwards of £20,000 per year for sporting rates. If this happens our business will close and the five families that depend on our business will be unemployed. I have employed Savills to fight my corner and there is a glimmer of hope that we might be successful due to peculiarities in our leases – if we are successful, then I have a hefty fee to pay Savills – either way, we are the losers!

I thought that our business was unique and that I would be the only one affected by this half-baked process, however I was contacted by another who I will not name but finds himself in an even more difficult situation – his licenses to shoot/tenancies are with FC, SNH & Scottish government. There is no manoeuvrability there and unless there is quick action from the authorities, he will have to close his 25 year-old business.

I have taken my own campaign to government ministers and have received sympathetic replies with quite a lot of talk about discussions and reviews but as far as I am aware there has been no action.

I have recently written again to the ministers explaining this individual case and pointed out that if something is not done with some urgency, small niche businesses will be lost and will not be easy to replace. The knock-on effect to our fragile rural economy is obvious – not to mention the negative effect on deer control within forestry and woodlands.

I realise that all our circumstances will be different but I would urge all to appeal against any rates notices received, no matter how small – our way of life is at stake here and we, the countryside must stand together. I would also urge SNH and FE to voice their opinion on the negative impact of sporting rates on deer control – I realise that to speak out against the government is treading on dangerous political ground for them but this is such a big blunder, I feel that you should stand and be counted!! Incidentally, the reason forestry has been rated so high, is because almost all privately owned forests are leased and for significant amounts – the assessors picked up on this and rated forestry accordingly. We have shot ourselves in the foot – this brings me to the next subject.

2. The cost of deer control. We all come under increasing pressure to reduce deer densities and we have to consider the cost of this. For sure deer densities are too high in some parts of Scotland and I can only talk with confidence about our own situation on Cowal. By planting 1000s of hectares of spruce back in the 1970s and 80s we have created the perfect habitat for deer – access is very poor and despite extending the hind season into March we are struggling to shoot the annual increment. To make things more difficult and confusing we have sporting rents. Looking back and when I joined EFG, the forest owners/investors were being charged for deer control; however, as the plantation established and stalking became more popular, there was an opportunity to turn this cost to the investor into an income and why not? The ocean of single age Sitka spruce was not under threat from deer – perhaps a limited amount of bark stripping but nothing to get too concerned about. Rents and other costs associated with deer control have continued to increase at least with inflation – rents probably higher than inflation but venison has not increased for decades. When I started my business during 1988, I could cover all costs with venison income and any sporting income from bucks and stags was a bonus and a little cream on top – the focus was on deer control and venison income more or less covered all costs of running our business. Today we have a very active sporting side to our business which is necessary to fill the ever-increasing gap between costs and venison income. To make the tight rope that we walk between deer control and sporting even more difficult is the fact that we now have restocks to protect – damage occurs and we come under pressure to reduce deer and control damage and yet the rent bills still come in – I have just received mine for the coming year and they have all increased – venison values have not and almost certainly will not so the gap gets bigger, so the need to increase our sporting income grows. FE has a clear approach to the problem – they see deer control as a cost to the forest and sporting is almost nonexistent. I am not sure that the private sector is

clear as to what it wants – without being too controversial, I would say that they want tight deer control and the rent – cake and eat it comes to mind!! Maybe we should be turning the clock back and consider going back to landowners paying to have deer controlled. Equally, it is difficult to quantify all of this because even with tight deer control, there will be damage – we know that with Sitka spruce, providing the ground prep and the plants are good, they will grow through browsing – Sitka is a very resilient tree!! Hardwoods and soft conifers are another subject and a different debate!

Also, we have to consider the wider picture and the impact of what we do to other local businesses – I estimate that we bring approx £30,000 per annum to other businesses in accommodation alone – B&B, evening meals & bar bills are not included, so probably nearer £50,000. All of this out of tourist season so doubly important!! Foresters/land managers have a responsibility to their clients who invest in forestry – often absentee so the focus is exactly on that – that is their job..... but with our rural economy so fragile, I feel there is a bigger picture and somewhere there is a balance – we constantly try to find that balance!!

The net cost of deer control has to be considered by all whether it is within woodlands or the open hill and all our situations will be slightly different. As I have already mentioned the gap between venison income and cost will continue to grow - Bute example.

One thing I will leave you with – if our deer populations are managed properly, they are an asset to us all and a significant factor in our rural economies. I have been fortunate enough to have travelled to various parts of the world on stalking/hunting holidays and I have concluded that we have some of the best sport in the world but it is some of the cheapest, if not the cheapest! We – the industry should consider a significant increase in our charges for this wonderful and almost unique sport which is easy to take for granted.