As the state’s reach extended into areas such as agriculture and health, the existence of separate machinery of government in these areas, especially extensive machinery dealing with Scottish education, created precedents. Scottish agriculture and health might otherwise have been assimilated, at least administratively, into English or British concerns. As the nascent liberal democratic interventionist state was emerging in the twentieth century, it would have a distinctly Scottish dimension. It was not, however, an entirely one-way phenomenon. In 1920, roads were removed from the ambit of the Scottish Office. A Ministry of Transport was created by legislation in 1919 and responsibilities relating to railways, canals, tramways, roads and bridges and harbours and piers were transferred by Order-in-Council the following year from the Scottish Secretary and Scottish Boards of Agriculture and Health. Some of these responsibilities were eventually re-transferred following the recommendations of the Royal Commission on Scottish Affairs (Balfour) in the mid-1950s. Nonetheless, for the most part, the traffic was one-way.

In a letter to A.J. Balfour following the General Election of January 1910, Austen Chamberlain wrote that the Conservatives’ ‘only chance of winning Scotland’ was ‘to change the issue on which Scotsmen vote. As long as it is the land, the landlords, and the rest of the Radical programme we shall be beaten.’ The issue of land had brought the Crofters Party into being as a Parliamentary grouping in the year the Scottish Office was created and following crofter disturbances in 1886, A.J. Balfour argued that the functions of the Scottish Office should include law and order. The ‘land question’ was emotive and no more so than in the Highlands and Islands. Over time, while the Scottish central administration developed, a series of administrative and semi-judicial bodies emerged for the Highlands and Islands.
Piecemeal intervention by the state in agriculture, often to eradicate animal disease, had been a feature of nineteenth-century Britain. As in education, there were demands in the latter half of the century for a separate department with a ministerial head to take charge of agricultural affairs. This was finally conceded in 1889 with the passage of the Board of Agriculture Act. In theory, it consisted of a number of senior officers of state following the precedent of the Board of Trade but it never met and its powers were exercised by the President. In a supply debate in March 1892, Munro Ferguson challenged A.J. Balfour, the Conservative leader in the Commons, on those responsible for Scottish agriculture on the Board of Agriculture. Balfour rejected the basis of the question and stressed that the Board of Agriculture was ‘not managed by a committee on which there are representatives, but it is managed by a single Minister, who is responsible directly to Parliament’. Within only three years of its establishment, the Board was described as existing only in theory.

Scottish land reformers sought security of tenure of existing holdings and the creation of new holdings and hoped to establish a Scottish Board of Agriculture. Legislation for England and Wales allowed county councils to procure land. In 1903, Sheriff David Brand, the first chairman of the Crofters Commission, advocated a strengthening of the Crofters Commission rather than attempting to realise the aims through county councils. Opponents’ proposals to extend the system of smallholdings were designed to reduce the effectiveness of machinery intended for land settlement. Considerable differences between the Scottish counties and those south of the border made the proposal inappropriate. The rating system in Scotland involved greater variation between counties in respect to the average valuation and acreage per head of population. As an undated memorandum in the agricultural files states,

In England the assessable rental per head of population in the administrative Counties varies from £3.4.0 to £8.6.0. In Scotland the corresponding range is from £1.7.0 to £12.3.0. Again, taking the acreage, the range in English Counties is from one-tenth of an acre per head to about 13 acres, with a general average for the whole of England of 2 acres per head. In Scotland, the corresponding range in individual counties is from 1 to 62 acres per head, with a general average for the whole country of 9 acres.

An additional complexity in any proposed attempt to introduce a county-based system of land settlement was that the personal incidence