

Election manifestos and our National Parks

Description

Judging by the election manifestos, our political parties do not see National Parks as a political issue or believe they are so far down the political agenda that there is no need to say anything meaningful about them. I think this is not just unfortunate, its a mistake politically. Part of any vision for Scotland should be about how we treat our finest landscapes and natural heritage.

Yes, I know it's the economy stupid that decides elections and, in these times of neoliberal austerity, there many basic issues about how people live jobs and income, housing, services which could be seen as having greater priority for election manifestos. But, if we are not to destroy the world entirely, there have to be places where human economic systems come second and, as importantly, humans need to be able to articulate the importance of values that cannot be expressed in monetary terms. National Parks, and other areas of the countryside which are not subjected to intensive human use, play an important role in this and what the political parties say about them therefore matters.

Three of the political parties make commitments to new National Parks in their manifestos:

Establish new national parks or landscape partnership areas, learning from the first two national parks in Scotland, bringing the benefits of improved management, conservation and tourism to other parts of the country; (The Scottish Liberal Democrats)

New national parks. Scotland has many areas of outstanding natural beauty that merit national park status, but currently recognises only two such areas. As a worldwide recognised designation for high quality environments, creating new national parks would bring a range of environmental, social and economic benefits to Scotland by increasing tourism in remote areas. The Scottish Campaign for National Parks has identified seven possible sites including the Isle of Harris, Galloway and the coastal areas of Mull, Coll and Tiree. Green MSPs will champion the creation of new national parks in these areas.

Scotland is the most beautiful country in the world and we are all rightly proud to call it home. We have hundreds of natural wonders sitting on our doorstep no matter where in Scotland we live. That's precisely why the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party supports the creation of further national parks across Scotland. They would not only help protect some of our greatest landscapes, but would also help attract more tourists and support local businesses.

Of the three parties that support new National Parks, only the Liberal Democrats indicates there might be lessons to be learned from the existing ones but unfortunately do not say what these might be. So, three commitments to new National Parks but not a single indication that all might not be well with our existing National Parks, whether inappropriate developments, restrictions on access rights or continued failures to conserve or enhance the natural environment.

National Parks of course while providing a means to present a vision for the natural environment, are not everything, and the political parties need to be judged on the what they say more widely about our relationship with the natural environment.

For me, there are some paradoxes in the manifesto. The SNP, whose growth originated mostly in the rural areas, while making a number of pledges in terms of rural subsidies, has little to say about the natural environment. What is included is mainly a rehash of current Scottish Government policies (including keeping windfarms out of National Parks). There is no attempt to articulate a vision for our natural environment in contrast to other parts of their manifesto which are quite visionary in tone. I find this gap strange and quite a contrast to the Scottish Tories whose view of the natural environment "Scotland is the most beautiful country in the world" is nationalistic in tone. Its almost as though the SNP is now acting as a predominantly urban political party, in the old labour mould, where people mattered but the natural environment was very much an afterthought (the Labour Party manifesto has not yet appeared). The other paradox is that RISE, who have very much presented themselves as representing the urban working class living on housing estates, have quite a radical vision for the countryside: *"Hunting estates create conditions suited for blood-sports but not for biological diversity. We would curtail the size of these estates and begin a process of reforestation, re-wilding and re-introduction of native species. To assist in this, we call for newly re-introduced beavers to immediately be given protected status, in light of their crucial role in flood prevention."*

The Greens had the most articulated vision for the natural environment, as one might expect, and are the only party to commit to widespread natural habitat restoration projects "something I believe that National Parks should be leading on. At the other end of the spectrum UKIP predictably wishes to get rid of all EC rules and subsidies, which determine how much of the countryside is used and managed, and leave all decisions about land-use to landowners (which probably implies they see no role for National Parks at all).

In-between, I am not sure that anything the political parties have said in their manifestos, really progresses our thinking. While in many ways that is disappointing, it is also an opportunity "the SNP, who are likely to form the next Government, could be seen as blank slate. We therefore need to work on developing a vision for new National Parks "as the Scottish Campaign for National Parks is doing (I am on the Executive) but also for existing ones. The post that follows from Ron Greer which articulates a new vision for National Parks based on wildlife refugia, does both and incidentally

challenges a couple of my most profoundly held beliefs. I hope it helps promote debate.

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