

A new minister for the Environment and our National Parks

Description

The failure of Aileen McLeod to be re-elected to the Scottish Parliament means there will be a new Minister for the Environment in the new Scottish Government. This post – which is responsible for our National Parks – has existed, under one title or another, since the creation of the Scottish Parliament. Dr McLeod was the tenth different person to hold the post, the incumbents surviving on average for 18 months. Hardly time to get your feet under the table and where the appointee has had little or no background expertise in environmental matters this has left power either with the civil servants or the senior Minister.

The contrast between the length of period in office of these junior Ministers and their boss, in the post that is now called the Cabinet Secretary for Rural Affairs, is striking. Just two people, Ross Finnie and Richard Lochhead, have held the senior posts since the creation of the Scottish Parliament. I hope Nicola Sturgeon will appoint a Minister for the Environment for the long-term, but it has to be the right person – someone who have a vision for the environment. I was not hopeful, given the lack of any vision in the SNP election manifesto, that this could happen but there is now an opportunity because Nicola Sturgeon has identified the environment as an area where the SNP will work with other political parties following the election.

Aileen McLeod made a number of disastrous mistakes as Environment Minister some of which have been listed by [raptor persecution scotland](#). I would add a few in respect of the National Parks:

- Her failure to stand by access rights or challenge the misinformation propagated by the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority and Forestry Commission Scotland that access rights do not apply to roadside camping
- Her failure to recognise the key role of recreational organisations in representing the largest group of stakeholders in our National Parks or listen to them
- Her failure to scrutinise or seek advice on the so-called evidence for the camping byelaws presented by the LLTNPA
- Her failure to respond to the flooding on Deeside with any vision for how National Parks might help reduce the impact of such catastrophic events in future through changing land-use from grouse moors to forest
- Her failure to respond to the latest persecution of raptors in the Cairngorms National Park with any message encouraging the National Park Authorities to use their existing powers to prevent this
- Her failure to respond to serious failures in governance in the LLTNPA:
 - Allowing the LLTNPA continuing to meet and make decisions in secret
 - Her silence on the role of the LLTNPA Board in covering up the Owen McKee case
 - Ignoring letters about serious flaws in the LLTNPA complaints process and the need to

address the absence of further mechanisms for public redress

Perhaps Dr McLeod's greatest failure of all though was to create any space in which to articulate a vision for the future. She seemed content to restrict her role to one of overseeing our National Parks and, as long as they met targets previously agreed with her civil servants, there really was no need to look too closely at what was going on or what the alternatives might be. Management not leadership.

I hope the new Minister will be open to discussion on questions such as:

- Conservation – what role could National Parks play in re-wilding, species introduction programmes and alternative ways of using the land?
- Recreation – what role could National Parks play in enabling people to experience and learn about the natural environment (particularly those without cars), in green tourism or in inspiring people to keep fit and healthy?
- Sustainable development – what role could National Parks play in Land Reform, shifting jobs from destructive to conservation land-uses, creating better paid jobs in tourism, tackling second homes that are empty for 11 months of the year?

A review of our current National Parks and what they have achieved – it does not need to be expensive – should be part of the discussion.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs
3. National Parks

Tags

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