

An opportunity for change – the LLTNPA convener election

Description

I have attended all the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority meetings since April 2015, when the Board agreed to recommend camping byelaws to the Minister, and in all that time the Board has never been asked to make a choice in public about anything. This is because everything has been decided in secret beforehand. Today's Board meeting will be different because there is an election for the new convener, which while conducted by secret ballot has to be held in public. At last Board Members have a choice.

The term of office of the current convener, Linda McKay, ends the day before the byelaws are due to come into effect on 1st March. I had been a little concerned that the Scottish Government was going to appoint her for another term as the vacancy has still not been advertised. The election creates an opportunity because Linda McKay's leadership has been disastrous for the National Park: the Board has taken to making all important decisions in secret, evidence is simply ignored, so-called partners are bulldozed into doing what the Park wants and the wider vision of what the National Park was for has been completely lost.

Two Board Members have put themselves forward for election, Major James Stuart and Petra Biberbach and both have made election statements ([see here](#)) and ([here](#)). The statements are different in style and while both contain implicit criticisms of the current leadership – talking of the need to reach out and talk to communities of interest that have been marginalised – neither makes the case for a fundamental change of direction.

Both statements should be taken with a large pinch of salt. Neither candidate has spoken much at public Board meetings, in fact James Stuart hardly said a word for his first year, so it's hard to tell what they stand for: maybe though their silence is because both have made well thought out contributions at the monthly secret Board Briefing sessions? On the camping byelaws, it would appear both are strong supporters, with James Stuart talking of bold steps to do the right thing (a peculiar take on NIMBYISM) while it was Petra Biberbach who had the April 2015 Board Minute changed to ensure it was recorded that the Loch Lomond islands were up next for camping byelaws. As for integrity, it appears James Stuart has now dropped the Major, to become a man of the people, while Petra Biberbach, along with most of the current Board, was involved in trying to cover up Owen McKee's secret trading in Scotgold shares ([see here for example](#)).

What we don't know of course is how far the limitations of the current candidates has been due to the control and influence that Linda McKay has exerted. I would suggest therefore the new candidates should be judged by how far they commit to the following:

- An end to secrecy. The practice of holding secret monthly Board Briefing sessions should end immediately. Yes, Boards occasionally need to meet to develop ideas or consider issues in great depth but when I was at SNH this was at most once or twice a year; it should be the same in our National Parks. Decision taken at meetings involving Board Members should be recorded, minutes taken timeously and made public available. The minutes of Board Meetings prior to 2014 should be restored to the Park website.
- Senior staff being held accountable for what they say and what they do by the Board. One example covered recently on Parkswatch ([see here](#)) was the failure of the Board to investigate who falsified the minutes of the April 2015 meeting which approved the byelaws. The misinformation put out by senior staff however continues on a weekly basis. On the byelaws, for example, Director of Conservation Simon Jones claimed on the radio that there was no camping ban ([see here](#)), while Chief Executive Gordon Watson trying to suggest on BBC Out of Doors 10 days ago ([see here](#)), in response to a question from Kevin Keane, that Loch Chon had experienced similar levels of problems with antisocial campers as east Loch Lomond had previously. Complete nonsense.
- Recreational organisations being re-established as key partners. It was the recreational organisations which called for National Parks to be created and represent the people who visit them. Since the creation of our Park Authorities however they have been sidelined (and not just on the camping byelaws) and this I believe explains many of the failures of both our National Parks. The new Convener should commit to immediate discussions with the recreational organisations of how the Park can extract itself from the byelaw disaster but then start engaging on longer-term issues, such as levels of visitor infrastructure in the Park and the impact on landscape of developments such as hydro schemes. This new approach should then be incorporated into the forthcoming National Park Partnership Plan.
- Real partnerships, where each partner is encouraged and clear about the contribution they needed to make, instead of the current farce where Park staff try to bulldoze partners into accepting their agenda while at the same time claiming that failures in the National Park (such as provision of toilets and litter bins) and the responsibility of these partners and nothing to do with the National Park Authority.
- Developing a proper visitor management plan which looks at the impacts of all visitors, instead of focussing all the Park's efforts and resources on a small group of campers, and develops the infrastructure necessary to support these visitors. Visitor Management needs to be placed in the wider context of the conservation of the Park as a whole, recognising that the major conservation issues are not visitor impacts but issues such as overgrazing, continued blanket afforestation and inappropriate developments.

If neither candidate commits to a change of course, there will be a further opportunity to change convener next year as a result of the Local Authority elections which could see a number of Local Authority representatives on the Board change. Then, a year on, a further four Government appointees, including Petra Biberbach, are due to retire in October 2018. By then we need a Board that looks and acts very differently and is focussed on how to achieve the statutory objectives of the National Park instead of acting like a third rate public authority.

Category

1. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

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1. Governance
2. LLTNPA
3. secrecy

Date Created

December 12, 2016

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