

The General Election and Scotland's National Parks

Description

What has been going on, and going wrong, in Scotland's two National Parks since they were created has been a microcosm of our society as a whole and I believe reflects the current crisis in capitalism. Increasing inequality, public authorities whose main purpose is to facilitate business interests (whether through outsourcing services or paving the way for developers), a wilful disregard for people and other species. I have avoided mentioning the General Election since it was announced ([see here](#)) but what happens tomorrow is very important to the future of our National Parks, despite what I regard as the sterile political "debate" that has been conducted in Scotland.

I am a Social Worker by trade and have sometimes question how I can justify time campaigning for better National Parks when there are so many homeless people on the street and we live in one of the richest countries in the world (whether you see Scotland or Britain as your country). I don't however think that social justice and access to the natural environment are separate issues. Historically some of the greatest campaigners for the countryside (Patrick Geddes in Scotland who was both a Professor of Botany and a Professor of Sociology) were also campaigners for social justice and its no coincidence that the post-war Labour Government created both the NHS and National Parks:

"the enjoyment of our leisure in the open air and the ability to leave our towns and walk on the moors and in the dales without fear of interruption are just as much part of positive health and well being as are the building of hospitals or insurance against sickness". This is not just a Bill. It is a People's Charter..

(Lewis Silkin introducing the National Park and Access to Countryside Act 1949).

The Party manifestos

I have taken a look at the Scottish political party manifestos to see whether they any are making the links between social and environmental justice and have any vision for the role National Parks could play in delivering this.

The SNP manifesto is interesting because while it articulates a vision for social justice, including at the UK level, there is almost nothing on the environment apart from climate change and no mention of National Parks. In my view it reads a bit like one half of the labour programme from the 1940s, albeit not fundamentally challenging the philosophical basis of neoliberalism.

The Scottish Labour Manifesto repeats the UK manifesto and at least recognises what is going wrong: *“The balance needs resetting: our air is polluted, our farms face an uncertain future, our fish stocks are collapsing, our oceans are used as dumping grounds, our forests, green belt, National Parks, and Sites of Special Scientific Interest are all under threat.”*• The proposals to redress the balance are mainly focussed on improving enforcement of environmental and other laws, which though welcome, is only half the challenge. There is little articulation of what a fairer Britain means for our landscapes.

The Liberal Democrat Manifesto also makes no mention of National Parks and focusses mainly on the risks that the protections offered by European environmental laws could be undermined by Brexit. The assumption is these laws are working and there is little vision for a different future (apart from a ban on the neonicotinoids which are destroying bee populations).

The Scottish Green manifesto is brief and although the most radical makes no mention of National Parks. Unfortunately the Party with perhaps the most potential to shift the terms of the current debate is hardly participating in the election – a missed opportunity.

Interestingly its the Tory manifesto which appears to offer the most holistic vision:

We can no longer think of economic development as a competing force against environmental protection. Earlier this year, the Scottish Conservatives set out our approach to environmental policy in a comprehensive policy document. The paper included ambitious plans across seven key sections including the circular economy, biodiversity, energy, homes and transport. In it, we have argued for the setting up of new national parks, the introduction of a range of non-fiscal incentives for the use of electric vehicles, new urban consolidation hubs to reduce traffic emissions or further development of district heating networks. Our approach will provide a greener and more sustainable Scotland for us all. We set ourselves this task because we believe it is one of the greatest challenges of our times. It is for this generation to tackle the issue and ensure that the next will live in a better, more productive and more sustainable world.

The debate on the establishment of New National Parks – Scottish Parliament: 24 May 2017

In the middle of the election campaign there was a debate in the Scottish Parliament on new National Parks, which you can see on Scottish Parliament TV ([see here](#)) . The motion, put by the Tories, was

That the Parliament recognises the value of Scotland's outstanding natural beauty, which creates jobs, contributes to the economy and attracts millions of tourists from Galloway and West Dumfries, the rest of Scotland and the world; notes what it sees as the success of the Cairngorms and Loch Lomond and The Trossachs national parks in conserving and enhancing the natural heritage of these areas, and notes the calls on the Scottish Government to conduct a review of national parks and consider the establishment of new ones.

What the Tories have recognised is that people care about the landscape and this can be good for the economy. The debate showed however that in Scotland the whole framework for discussion for conservation and enjoyment of the countryside is being held in a resolutely neo-liberal framework, which assumes neo-liberalism and austerity is here to stay (despite the possibility of an earthquake south of the border tomorrow which no-one could have anticipated 6 weeks ago).

This was summed up by the Minister of the Environment, Roseanna Cunningham, at the end of the debate where she said she did not share the optimism that new National Parks could be set up with little cost and that the reality is there is less money and that the money has to come from elsewhere. She described the silence on this from the other contributors to the debate as telling. She went on to say that the *costs associated with all 7 National Parks* (as proposed by the Scottish Campaign for National Parks of which I am a member) *would run into tens of millions* in the current circumstances there is no likelihood of being able to assign the finance. While she applauded the *desire to protect Scotland's iconic landscapes* she also stated *National Parks are just one designation that can boost economic development of an area* suggesting she sees National Parks as a means of economic development, albeit one we cannot afford. The response from the Tories to this challenge was that new National Parks was all about getting the right Business Case but they did not challenge the austerity narrative, suggesting they agreed with Roseanna Cunningham, that the main issue is about how we spend limited resources.

They are not alone in this. In Wales the Labour Government has been trying to change the law on National Parks in order to *free up* economic development ([see here](#)). A reflection of the schism between the economic philosophy of the Corbynite UK labour party and the labour party in the devolved administrations.

I found the debate very disappointing. It provided little indication at present that our politicians in Scotland are able to articulate a vision which is not entirely based on money and that National Parks

matter for reasons other than our neoliberal economy (though Alison Johnstone from the Greens did make the case for National Parks protecting mountain hares).

I still haven't decided how I will vote tomorrow. The possibilities of alternative visions of society in which National Parks could play an important role which were around during the Independence Referendum appear to have shifted to south of the border. I hope they remain after tomorrow as I think this could help rejuvenate visionary thinking and debate in Scotland.

Category

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Tags

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