

Time to remove Highlands and Islands Enterprise from Cairn Gorm

Description

There is no hope for the future of Cairn Gorm while Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) remain as owners of the land on this mountain, while also acting as funders of most of the developments on the upper slopes. This was evident from the time that their predecessor body, Highlands and Islands Development Board (HIDB), bullied the Forestry Commission in 1971 to relinquish ownership of the upper slopes and transfer the land from the Commission to the Board. That land transfer required the approval of the Secretary of State for Scotland.

The problems flowing from HIDB ownership were examined in detail at the Lurchers Gully Public Inquiry in 1981, which led to a Secretary of State rejection of plans to expand ski facilities westwards from Coire Cas. This was followed by a House of Commons Select Committee on Scottish Affairs investigation into HIDB's performance on Cairn Gorm. The problems identified by the Inquiry and the Select Committee investigation continued when HIE replaced the HIDB.

The funicular project emerged from the time when Sir Fraser Morrison was chairman of HIDB. He was also chairman of Morrison Construction for many years. During the period when the Chief Executive of HIE was Iain Robertson the funicular project received planning approval (in 1999) and the then First Minister, Donald Dewar, personally approved public funds to assist in the funicular construction. This was supposed to be the final requirement for public funds to support the funicular in its construction and operation. HIE awarded the contract for the construction of the funicular to Morrison Construction. Iain Robertson then left HIE and joined Morrison Construction where he presumably once again enjoyed the company of Fraser Morrison who by that time was no longer chairman of HIE.

Robertson's transfer from HIE to Morrison Construction led immediately to the resignation of Alan Blackshaw from the Board of Moray, Badenoch and Strathspey Enterprise, part of the HIE enterprise network. Blackshaw, a former senior civil servant (he had been Director General of the UK Government's Offshore Supplies Office during the early days of North Sea Oil exploration and development) had been repeatedly asking within the HIE network for information and evidence to justify the public expenditure on the proposed funicular railway. As Blackshaw had also been a senior figure in UK representative bodies for skiing and mountaineering, as well as co-chair of Inter-Governmental Conferences on Sustainable Mountain Development in Aviemore and Trento (Italy) in the mid 1990s, he was the most expert figure within the HIE network to advise on the suitability, or otherwise, of a funicular railway on Cairn Gorm. The HIE response was to ignore or prevaricate, verging on bullying and intimidation. The hostility HIE displayed to Blackshaw was a disgrace but appears typical of a public body which has displayed unsurpassed arrogance in its dealings with persons who ask reasonable questions of how it spends enormous sums of public money on Cairn Gorm.

David Hayes, the very well known and respected Director of the Landmark Centre (Carrbridge) and other successful visitor service facilities in Scotland, also had reservations on a par with those of Blackshaw. Hayes commissioned David Pattison, former head of tourism development at HIDB, to

examine the economic viability of the proposed funicular. Pattison's report appeared to indicate that the funicular had no hope of being a successful facility, independent of continuing support from public funds, and the whole pattern of public use and associated facilities needed to be re-examined, from the bottom to the top of the mountain, across both the Forestry Commission land on the lower slopes and the HIE land of the upper slopes. The response from HIE appeared to be one of complete rejection of both Hayes and Pattison's conclusions.

A few years ago Forestry Commission Scotland tried to secure an asset transfer and re-establish their ownership of the whole of Glenmore Forest Park by transferring all of the land then in HIE ownership back to themselves, as it had been from the 1920s up until 1971. This land transfer was thwarted by unknown factors, to the consternation of FCS.

Following his resignation from the HIE network Blackshaw detailed his concerns about the performance of HIE on Cairn Gorm in a report to the Auditor General for Scotland. No politician who has read this report, or the material produced by David Hayes, as well as previous material contained within the Lurchers Gully Inquiry proceedings or subsequent Parliamentary investigations can reach any other conclusion than the need to remove HIE from any ownership role on Cairn Gorm with immediate effect. At its simplest all the HIE land needs to be transferred to FCS. At a later stage FCS could facilitate transfer of all or part of the Glenmore Forest Park to a Local Community Body set up to meet land reform statutory requirements. Financial responsibility for the running or removal of the funicular should remain with HIE for evermore. As every week passes the financial crisis enveloping Cairn Gorm deepens. Now is the time for politicians to act, to pull their heads out of the sand, and get HIE off the mountain at the very earliest opportunity. A previous First Minister got us into this mess, the current FM needs to extract us from the quagmire.

Category

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