

Flamingo Land and the sale of public assets on the cheap

Description

Are we to let private interests take Lomond Shore from us



KEVIN MCKENNA

ON Loch Lomond's bonnie banks this week only the clouds lurking sullenly over the hills that garland them hinted at a storm. This is one of those places that looks as magnificent in wind and rain as in sunshine and this week has seen it at its moody finest. Yet it has become the focal point of a planning and environmental row which swamps anything the elements can throw at it.

Last month, updated plans for a £30 million leisure development at the southern gateway to Loch Lomond at Balloch were re-presented to Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park authority. The development is being backed by Scottish Enterprise but alarms are being raised at the process by which the land was bought and at the bewildering nexus of business and political "relationships" that have paved the way for it to happen. In 2016, Scottish Enterprise announced that the preferred bidder to develop the site was Flamingo Land, an outfit that runs a theme park and zoo in North Yorkshire. Both Flamingo Land and its partners at Scottish Enterprise insist that their plans

are sensitive to the fragile beauty and eco-structure of Loch Lomond, perhaps the most globally recognised image of Scotland's natural beauty.

The national agency, together with Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park authority and other supporters of the development, have variously described this verdant expanse as "derelict" and thus crying out for a themed and manufactured facility such as this. But you just have to walk around the perimeter of the area that has been marked for development to appreciate the huge scale of what is being proposed. This water and the land around it has been formed over millions of years by fire and ice into something sacred in its beauty. Now, part of its essential character is to be transformed and bent into unnatural shapes by a theme park. Places such as Ben Lomond, Balmaha, Inveraray and Balquhiddier could be joined by a neighbour which calls itself Flamingo Land.

The Loch Lomond plans include something called an "apart-hotel" with 60 bedrooms. The space earmarked for this large facility suggests that it will come to dominate the shore and the surrounding terrain. There will also be a "budget" facility as well as a development of self-catering units and six private houses valued at around £800,000 each. It will involve the wholesale destruction of the woodland presently there and severely restrict access to a space gifted to the public by a 17th-century royal charter. The destruction of wildlife, including red squirrels, otters and bats as well as myriad insect life is almost cheerfully assumed in the proposal and justified by a pledge to "re-locate" some of these wee beasts. This project is as appropriate as

“This place was once said to be ‘the lungs of Glasgow’ by the late, great, Tom Weir

hanging a giant gold medallion around the neck of the sphynx.

The land was purchased more than eight years ago for the trifling sum of £200,000 by Scottish Enterprise. Conveniently, there is no mention of the profits that will be realised for the developers once this public space becomes private. Scottish Enterprise and Flamingo Land say that it will provide budget holidays for families at the lower end of the economic scale. This place – described as “the lungs of Glasgow” by the great Scottish walker and naturalist, Tom Weir – could once be visited on day trips by working-class Glasgow families who were unable to afford week-long holiday packages. Nothing in Scotland's immediate economic forecasts suggests that disadvantaged families will be flocking to this contrived woodland experience.

The failure of Scotland's main political parties and the Scottish Government to scrutinise this development more closely or to answer questions about what laughably passed for a consultation process has been curious. It's been left to the Scottish Greens and the MSP Ross Greer to step into the breach. Thus far, he has collected and lodged more than 50,000 objections in the largest petition of this nature in Scottish civic history.

This week, Mr Greer poured scorn at the optimistic job estimates imagined by the developers. “We were promised 300 jobs, then we found out that most of them would be part-time and seasonal, then we're told 159 and now we're told it's 140. And if we read the small print in the application we see that over three in four of these jobs would be created anyway if Flamingo Land doesn't go ahead.”

In recent years, many of the most hallowed and wild places in Scotland have been subject to the predations of billionaires seeking to annex for their tinsel empires. Sutherland and Aberdeen, Trump and one of his successors in turning stretches of the north-west coast into playgrounds. Most grievous is the exclusive housing development soon to proceed. Scotland's attempts at land reform have been rendered ridiculous by Bargain Hunt taking possession of our nooses.

Yesterday and last week, families walking along the pathway amidst open fields were counted at least 40 per cent dog-walkers and a group of American women, straggling trees. A stretch of unsprung ground bounded by Drunkenkin, used by local schools for football days. This is a vibrant public space.

This dramatic peninsula doesn't belong to any one person or individual. How can ownership of this land be sold and this water that nurtures the people of Scotland and the world who live and take shelter in it?

It can never be sold to one owner and parcel up to interested buyers for a price. This so-called "public" ownership of this land by the Scottish Government is a sham with stimulating economic growth and creating jobs, not an offshoot of Arthur Dalrymple participating in the private enterprise enjoyed by the public.

Article from Herald on Saturday

[This post was corrected and updated in June 2024 after I identified a mistake about the price Scottish Enterprise had paid for the Riverside Site].

Last week I mentioned the growing media interest in the Flamingo Land proposals at Balloch and it was great to see this powerful piece from Kevin McKenna at the weekend. Mr McKenna got one thing wrong, however – or perhaps a mistake was made in the editing? Scottish Enterprise did not acquire the Riverside Site at Balloch for the “trifling sum” of £200,000 over eight years ago. £200k is the

amount that Scottish Enterprise apparently told Jackie Baillie, the local labour MSP, the site was worth.

Ignore for the moment the financial contributions Scottish Enterprise have made towards the cost of their joint planning application with Flamingo Land ([see here](#)), Parkswatch has recently been passed information about the original cost of acquiring the land on the Riverside Site for the public:

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The final area of land that is included in the Riverside and Woodbank House plan. The site is the area that includes Woodbank and former grounds. We understand that the site was acquired by Flamingo Land Ltd in 2001.

How much did Scottish Enterprise pay for the site?

The Scottish Development Agency purchased the site from the British Railways Board in 1989. Scottish Enterprise paid £2,600,000 for the site to Scottish Development Company Limited in 1991.

I hope you find this helpful. However, if you have any further questions please get back in touch.

The snapshot appears to be part of an FOI response from Scottish Enterprise

Information now available from the Registers of Scotland website clarifies that the £180k was for the Riverside part of the site, comprising the old station and former railway yards along the River Leven, while the £2,380,000 was for the land to the west, around and south of Drumkinnon Bay, some of which is now occupied by the Lomond Shores development

This makes the worst of Thatcher's public asset fire sales appear good value. Property prices have inflated more than almost any other area of the economy so its not unreasonable to assume that these original investments should now be worth many times more than what was paid. Were the Flamingo Land Planning Application to be approved, the Riverside Site would become a piece of prime real estate, even if the real truth is the gateway to Loch Lomond is worth far more than money can buy. Yet Scottish Enterprise is now apparently going to sell this public asset for a measly £200k. If that is not corrupt, I am not sure what is. If Scottish Enterprise is prepared to sell the site for this amount, then there is no reason it should not transfer it to the local community.

Time for the Scottish Government to intervene..

Scottish Enterprise will no doubt claim that they are legally bound by the Exclusivity Agreement they signed with Flamingo Land. This, they claim, prevents them disposing or transferring the land to anyone else. Interestingly, the Exclusivity Agreement was only signed AFTER the Balloch Charrette was over even though Scottish Enterprise had agreed to appoint Flamingo Land before the charrette started. Throughout the whole charrette process both Scottish Enterprise and the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority kept Flamingo Land's appointment secret from the public. A deeply cynical and manipulative act.

The Exclusivity Agreement no doubt contains an agreement about how the land should be valued prior to sale. That always should have been in the public realm but the need for this to happen is much more pressing now we know the likely original cost of the land was £2,380,000. Yet so far Scottish Enterprise have refused to divulge most of the contents of the Exclusivity Agreement:

The Exclusivity Agreement between Scottish Enterprise (SE) and Flamingo Land contains commercially sensitive information and is therefore withheld under section 33(1)(b) of the Freedom of Information Scotland Act (FOISA) 2002. Reasons why we have withheld this document under this exemption are explained at the end of this letter. [Appendix A reason refuse exclusivity agreement](#)

(Review of Response to Freedom of Information Request dated 26th February).

This is all wrong. Public Authorities should be open and transparent about land sales and, even more importantly, consult the public before deciding to sell any land. Widespread public consultation – in places like National Parks it should be national consultation – should, as part of the new Planning Bill, be made a legal requirement before ANY public land can be sold off to private interests.

Meantime, the Scottish Government needs to intervene now, stop the land sale and put a halt to the Planning Application.

Its also worth asking how many politicians, both national and local, and how many of the local power players who have backed Flamingo Land, knew Scottish Enterprise was proposing to sell it for a song

compared to its original purchase price? The answer would tell us something about the extent to which the public realm in Scotland, including National Parks, have been captured by private financial interests.

As Kevin McKenna argued, National Parks should be for nature and people, not profit.

Category

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