

Corporate gaslighting – why we did nothing as skiing died at Cairn Gorm

Description

[Parkswatch is very pleased to publish this open letter from Canada about the situation at Cairn Gorm]

Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation in which a person, or organization, seeks to sow seeds of doubt in a targeted individual or in members of a targeted group, making them question their own memory, perception, and sanity. The 1944 psychological thriller “Gaslight” stars Ingrid Bergman & Charles Boyer. The film’s title alludes to how the abusive husband (Boyer) slowly dims the gas lights in their Edwardian home, while pretending nothing has changed, in an effort to make his wife (Bergman) doubt her own perceptions. He also uses the lights in the sealed-off attic to secretly search for jewels belonging to his wife’s aunt whom he murdered many years ago. He makes loud noises as he searches, including talking to himself. The wife repeatedly asks her husband to confirm her perceptions about the dimming lights, noises and voices, but in defiance of reality, he keeps insisting that the lights are the same and instead it is she who is going insane. He intends on having her assessed and committed to a mental institution, after which he will be able to gain power of attorney over her and search more effectively. Using denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying, gaslighting involves attempts to destabilize the victim and delegitimize the victim’s beliefs. Gaslighting can be committed by anyone and can be especially detrimental when the perpetrator has a position of power.

In the Donald Trump era of post-truth politics, the situation at Cairngorm Mountain has resulted from years of fake news and lies, known as corporate gaslighting. We believed that the future of skiing was the top priority of Cairngorm Mountain management. With this belief, we allowed the slow removal of uplift and infrastructure on the mountain, without question, until there was nothing left. Lifts were not modernised or replaced because we wanted to believe the management. New lifts were coming in several years, when the company has enough capital. Don’t worry, everything will be just fine in 5-10 years. With the few remaining ski lifts closed after failing health and safety inspections, plus the indefinite closure of the funicular railway, bankruptcy seems inevitable. This was not the result of global warming, climate change, incompetent management, or lack of financial investment. This was a deliberate plan to force skiing off the mountain. A plan that started during the failed expansion into Lurcher’s Gulley in 1981.

My late father, Alan Bell (1934 – 2019) from Blackpool, Lancashire, was a BASI III instructor. Alan had taught himself to ski at Glencoe in the late 1950’s before moving east to the fledgling resort at Cairn Gorm. In December 1961, the White Lady detachable Chairlift opened. It was a joint venture between the Swiss company GMD Mueller and the British Ropeway company, who specialised in aerial ropeways for mining projects. The project was overseen by Bob Clyde, an engineer from Glasgow. The Chairlift was a hybrid, based on a 4-person, detachable Gondola system, but with out-facing, two-seater chairs. This was extended down to the car park in 1964. During the 1960’s, new Mueller T-bars were added nearly every year, establishing the largest choice for skiers in Scotland. By the early 1970’s, Coire na Ciste was opened up for skiing. Coire na Ciste T-bar at the top of the mountain opened in 1972, followed by the Ptarmigan T-bar in 1973. The Ciste and West Wall chairlifts were built in late 1973 and opened in early 1974. The first departure from Mueller – the Aonach poma was built in

1977. So many people had struggled, working for days, weeks, months and years, in often atrocious weather, some on a volunteer basis, as they strove to make commercial skiing on the hill a reality. It paid off too. During the skiing boom of the 1980's, there were over 7000 skiers on the mountain per day. Aviemore was transformed from a sleepy Highland train station into a world class, state of the art tourist destination.

Cairngorm offered the most diverse, excellent skiing Scotland had to offer. Can we imagine how horrified those pioneers would react to the current status?

I was 3½ years-old when my father began teaching me to ski in a field below the Coire na Ciste car park in March 1974. The following ski seasons were spent in ski school under the watchful eye of the wonderful Hazel Bain.

By 1980, my father was teaching full time. Consequently, we spent every weekend on the hill from January until April from 1980-1986. In 1981, I remember Bob Clyde unveiling plans to develop Lurcher's Gulley & Coire an t-Sneachda following the successful installation of the M1 & Fiacail Ridge pomas, plus the extension to the Car Park T-bar. When those plans were rejected, much to everyone's surprise, shock was replaced by a growing concern that a backlash was forming against the existing ski area itself. The Day Lodge poma was the last lift be installed in 1987, linking Coire Cas car park with the mid station of Coire na Ciste chairlift, via the Aonach, thus completing the dream envisaged by Bob Clyde in the 1960's.

Uplift on the mountain was finally complete, but there were obvious problems. For example, Mueller lifts were designed in the 1950s for ski resorts in the Swiss and French alps. They rarely had to contend with exposed, treeless, rolling mountains, constantly pounded by prevailing westerly winds from the north Atlantic Ocean. Uplift regularly shut down at Cairngorm due to deropement on the pylons. In gusty, high winds, the chairs and T-bars acted like sails, literally pulling the haul rope off the sheave trains. Sheave trains are the blocks of pulleys mounted to each pylon to support the moving haul rope.

It was time to focus on the future. Gerhard Mueller died in 1985. The company was taken over by employees, following a management buy-out, but Mueller lifts were considered dinosaurs at this stage following the innovations of companies, such as Poma, France and Dopplemeyer in Switzerland Mueller lifts went bankrupt in 1992. Most notably, both Poma & Dopplemeyer had developed sheave trains that were far more resistant to wind. The logical approach was to consider a high capacity Gondola from Poma or Dopplemeyer, similar to the access Gondola at Aonach Mor, on the Nevis Range, near Fort William, to replace the White Lady & Car Park chairlifts. Many of us believed this would happen.

Flash forward to May 1994. My father, mother and I were having dinner at Loch Insh with Clive & Sally Freshwater, plus friends from the Cairngorm Chairlift Company Ltd., as it was. The atmosphere was solemn. Bob Clyde had recently died. During his funeral, mourners paid tribute to the man who was essentially the founder of commercial skiing at Cairngorm Mountain. His engineering background was essential in building the White Lady Chairlift and the original Shieling. What followed were two conversations that I've never forgotten. Whenever plans were rejected for expansion at Cairngorm, a conservationist lobby group, who had allegedly gained considerable power and influence within the UK Tory government, under Margaret Thatcher and the Scottish Office, were automatically blamed. Their goal, allegedly, although never made official, was ostensibly to remove all the ski lifts from the hill,

remove access to walkers, climbers and skiers and seal off the entire mountain. Success relied on engaging in a plan to lie and misdirect the public.

The following discussion involved the proposed replacement of the Car Park & White Lady chair lifts. Prior to the official announcement, the general consensus was the high capacity, detachable Gondola. This included the bottom station being located down at Glenmore with a new car park adjacent to the existing snow gates. There would be no vehicular access by the public onto the mountain, thereby removing a huge environmental issue of having hundreds of cars on the mountain each day.

Clive Freshwater asked for silence at the table before announcing the new lift; a cable driven funicular railway. Everyone at the table momentarily froze, complete with a look of utter incredulity. Why a funicular? Official publicity claimed there would be increased passengers per hour resulting in very little queuing, full access to the Shieling, the White Lady and Coire Cas. There would be no unsightly lift towers or steel cables, no high-wind closures and no issues with snow blockage due to the tracks being raised off the ground by concrete supports. It's very rare for an engineering project of this scale to make such claims because they were all lies. Construction costs spiralled during the build, making it one of the most expensive ski lifts ever built. Aside from the middle station being located in the wrong place, 80 metres uphill from the Shieling, located next to the bottom of the M1 poma. It was a perilous, exhausting walk to the Shieling. Consequently, the Shieling eventually closed due to lack of customers. The funicular became notorious for long queues as wait times significantly increased. The base station at the Day Lodge up to the mid station above the Shieling were blocked with every major blizzard. The entire system was beleaguered with technical issues that often caused the train to stop for hours, sometimes several days. There were too many design errors and too many operating issues that didn't plague contemporary systems around the world. I'm unsure if the funicular operated more efficiently than the previous two chairlifts. I doubt it was even close.

In 2005, a much bigger problem appeared with the funicular. I had climbed the Burma road, to the west of Aviemore, on my mountain bike. At the pass, before the drop down into Glen Dulnain, I had a clear view across the Spey valley to Cairngorm. It was late May, but there were still some considerable patches of snow on the Headwall, Coire Cas, Lurcher's Gully, but none on the White Lady. The funicular track looked like an ugly gouge had been cut into the mountain. Even with binoculars, I had great difficulty finding the towers on the West Wall Chair, the White Lady tow or the M1 poma. No unsightly towers indeed. Worst of all, I realized that the funicular had bisected the White Lady run. The huge concrete supports for the track acted like a giant snow fence, preventing snow from filling the gully that had once been the most famous and enjoyable run on the hill. The icing on the cake was the required safety distance of 30 feet from each side of the track in the event of the haul rope snapping. Surely this was obvious prior to construction? Yes, I believe it was.

My father discussed these concerns with his old friend, Willie McKenna, that evening in the Winking Owl. Willie had worked a Pisten Bully on the hill for many years before taking a job with the Rothiemurchas estate. Alan and I were incredulous as we listened to Willie's account of what was happening behind the scenes at Cairngorm Mountain.

The decision to build the funicular was, in part, to appease the environmental lobby and complete the plan to remove uplift. Visitors would be confined to the funicular, preventing them venturing onto the mountain, except for the viewing platform at the new Ptarmigan restaurant, thus turning the mountain into a sort of museum / botanical garden. To avoid the obvious outcry from the established skiing

community and the many local businesses and hotels in the Spey valley, global warming & climate change were to be used as the justification for this core lift policy.

The Ciste & West Wall chairs were mothballed during the non-winter of 2002, followed by the removal of the Fiaccaill T-bar in 2005. Next on the hit list was the Aonach Poma, one of the very best advanced “red runs” Cairngorm had to offer. I was skiing down the Aonach in March 2006. The lift looked unusually quiet until I realized the haul rope had been removed. I asked the liftie on the West Wall poma what was going on. He replied that the lift was in a “go” situation following its annual servicing. However, a decision had been made the previous week to remove the haul rope. No explanation or press release was provided. Consequently, the Aonach Poma would never run again. By this point, season ticket holders and visitors appeared to be in a state of collective denial. There should have been outrage, not apathy. Several months later, the M1 poma was scheduled for dismantling. No reason was provided, but the Scottish Ski Council were informed. They had provided a funding grant for the installation of the lift in 1980. Cairngorm Mountain was threatened with legal action, saving the M1 poma from demolition. Sadly, the White Lady tow was chosen to be removed instead, no later than 2010 (for reasons unknown).

Politically, this was difficult to achieve. This tow was the workhorse on the mountain, transporting skiers to the top of the mountain’s most prestigious run and often used as an alternative when it was too windy to run the White Lady chairlift. Remove it and the only way to the Ptarmigan will be the M1 poma if the funicular was out of service. This required a very steep walk from the Shieling to a now worn out Poma that is plagued with technical issues, regularly out of service for days on end, its service life had expired in 2010. The White Lady tow was in perfect working order. How could they permanently put the Lady out of business, short of a natural disaster? Bingo.

The White Lady tow incident in 2007 was particularly egregious, considering the huge sums of money that had recently been spent investing in the 40-year-old lift. The drive station had been renovated, using parts from the White Lady & Car Park chairlift, including a new gearbox to remove the famous “scream”. The haul rope had been replaced in 2004 and I believe all the T-bars had been upgraded too, just two years before, in 2005, with much safer spring-boxes. What followed was deplorable; the return bullwheel at the top station of the White Lady tow was deliberately neglected. Zero maintenance was carried out in the autumn as the other lifts were serviced before the first snows came. Without the usual thick layers of grease to protect it, the bearing housing filled up with water, froze, expanded repeatedly, eventually causing the steel itself to tear, leading to a catastrophic failure. The liftie started the motor on that fateful day. The return bullwheel at the top station immediately sheered off from the return gantry. The haul rope, at full tension, catapulted the bullwheel at incredible speed, crashing into the next pylon, completely destroying it. The mangled remains of the bullwheel landed on the snow fencing, tore it to shreds and finally skidded a quarter way down the east side of the White Lady before hitting a snow drift. The resulting shock wave from the haul rope caused tremendous damage to the lift’s pylons. The T-bars acted like deadly missiles, destroying everything in their path. For the rest of the season, nothing was done to remove the T-bars or the severed haul rope from further damaging the remaining pylons. Did this outrageous act of corporate vandalism make the headlines? Of course not.

As with the rest of the uplift at Cairngorm, the management took full advantage of our complete ignorance of ski lift engineering. We accepted the findings of whatever nonsense the management told us in bogus reports. The incident with the White Lady tow was reported as accidental negligence and

swept under the carpet. At the season ticket holder's AGM, the following year, a question was asked about reinstating the White Lady tow. The answer was simple, "There are no plans to reinstate the White Lady tow." We sat idly by as the drive station was sold for scrap to Glenshee in 2009, whilst the remaining pylons slowly disappeared over the next year. The 2010 deadline had been reached.

The link poma was moved from the Ciste Chair / West Wall middle station to the plateau about the same time the Aonach Poma's substation was removed, removing all trace of the lift. The link poma was renamed the Polar Express (how amusing). It was promoted as a new lift from new investment in infrastructure. However, it had been sold for cheap from its original location at the Aviemore dry ski slope where it had stood since 1981. Neither new, nor an investment. The lift expired its service life in 2006.

From 2009, winter conditions improved dramatically. In early 2010, skiers were interviewed by BBC & ITV news, in the Coire na Ciste car park, complaining about the lack of uplift in the Ciste and West Wall. They had to wait in long queues for a bus to take them back to the Coire Cas car park. Any promise to reinstate the chairlifts from the management to avoid growing public hostility during this fiasco? Absolutely not.

Around this time, I wondered if summer mountain biking was possible using the Coire na Ciste chairlift. I pitched the idea to former Olympic skier and current downhill trainer, Andrew Freshwater. I've known Andy since we were kids and we both share grave concerns for the future of skiing at Cairngorm. To our surprise, the mountain biking venture was welcomed with considerable enthusiasm. The Ciste Chair was to be taken out of mothballs and put to work. The first job was to clean and service the sheave trains on each pylon. The only pylon visible from the Ciste Carpark was pylon 1, located just above the old café. Both sheave trains were removed for servicing. During the summer of 2010, Andy wondered why the Ciste chair remained closed. Management informed him that current workloads left the Ciste project on "the back burner" with no priority. Servicing of all sheave trains was estimated to take 5-10 years. Andy realized we had been fooled. The sheave trains from pylon 1 were still absent the day it was felled in August 2017, crashing to the ground and sold for scrap. The most successful buzzword created by the management regarding the Ciste & West Wall chairlifts was "obsolete." We accepted it without question until the Save the Ciste group valiantly fought to save both chairlifts.

Incidentally, I've been living in Vancouver, Canada for the past 14 years. My local ski hill is Cypress Mountain that operates two Mueller fixed grip, double chairlifts dating from 1971 & 1976 respectively. Whistler Mountain resort has retained two Mueller T-bars, built in 1965. In fact, there are many Mueller chairlifts and T-bars operating in Canada and the USA. Spare parts and service are provided in North America by Mueller Lifts, located in Vernon, British Columbia. There is also Rowena, the modern iteration of GMD Mueller lifts based in Europe. I respected the Save the Ciste Campaign for their passion and sheer determination. However, I did warn them that they would ultimately fail. I also mentioned the ski lifts due for removal based on the following lies;

The concrete bases on each tower need replacing therefore, it's prohibitively costly.

The lift has expired its service life, preventing any chance of the required public liability insurance being issued

The lift is obsolete. Parts are no longer available.

These claims are interchangeable, false, and outrageous. Coire Cas T-bar was built in 1962. It's the oldest lift still operating, but none of the above issues apply.

Without warning, the Coire na Ciste and the West Wall chairlifts were demolished in August 2017. Folks from Save the Ciste could not believe what they were witnessing as each pylon was felled like a tree, crashing to the ground before being cut into pieces and dumped in a huge skip located in the car park. The sensitive environment was treated like a construction site. Diesel oil and various industrial, highly toxic chemicals were allowed to contaminate the entire area. It was horrendous.

The Shieling platter lift, originally a T-bar (built in 1964) was suddenly removed and replaced with a rope tow – the most difficult, soul-destroying and dangerous type of lift available and certainly not for beginners. Contemporary resorts around the globe have installed user-friendly conveyors, known as magic carpet rides. The Shieling Sunkid, as it is now called, has proved to be very unpopular and driven beginners/ intermediate skiers to the Lecht.

We can speculate on which lift is next, but the damage has already been done.

It was obvious from the day the funicular went into service that skiing on Cairngorm mountain was doomed. Within 20 years, Scotland's premiere ski resort has been completely destroyed, in slow motion and in plain sight. Nobody is held responsible, the local economy is devastated, and yet, many people still believe the management will be investing in new uplift and infrastructure for skiing at the Cairngorm of the future.

Finally, the state of the funicular:

The concrete bases on each tower need replacing. Therefore, it's prohibitively costly.

Really? Where have we heard that before? Once again, people just accept this answer. Nobody called for an independent assessment. No attempt to hold Dopplemeyer and its sub-contractors accountable. Nothing.

Alternatively, the current state of inertia with the funicular may have been intentional, serving its purpose for the time required to remove uplift. Without the funicular, I cannot foresee the financial viability of commercial skiing given the low number of visitors this year.

Both Glenshee and Glencoe have spent the past several years investing in new, higher capacity chairlifts that always get the snowboarder's approval. Cairngorm mountain removed their two remaining chairlifts.

If bankruptcy is announced in 2020, I can only think of one phrase; mission accomplished. However, the main question remains unanswered; who killed skiing at Cairngorm? Gaslighting succeeds because it's insidious but extremely manipulative. By the time we realize we've been had, we're so conflicted, at odds with ourselves and each other, not sure if we remember events clearly, that the damage has been done

The sad answer is, we killed skiing at Cairngorm. We spent 20 years of complicity as everything was removed from the mountain. We did nothing. No legal challenges, no court orders, not even any outrage registered in the local or national news.

I'm sure many will disagree, but, sadly, it's what really happened.

Alistair Bell. December 2019.

Vancouver, Canada.

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Date Created

January 2, 2020

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