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Scotland's two National Park

Park probes 'quip' made by its deputy

THE Cairngorms National Park Authority (CNPA) board deputy convener has been removed from her duties while an investigation is carried out into remarks she supported made about an MP.

Geva Blackett is taking 'a period of leave' from her role after backing comments that north-east MP Andrew Bowie (Scottish Conservative) 'should be strung up from a bridge' made from a separate Twitter account last Wednesday evening.

Media reports state the original Tweet described Mr Bowie as 'pathetic and grovelling' and suggested 'dangling' him from Kincardine Bridge.

Councillor Blackett, an SNP Aberdeen-shire councillor, then suggested another bridge retorting to a response by the MP.

The post has since been deleted and police are investigating.

CNPA board convener Xander McDade said: "Councillor Geva Blackett posted remarks on Twitter about Andrew Bowie MP.



Geva Blackett.

"Councillor Blackett subsequently removed the comment and issued an apology to Mr Bowie.

"Councillor Blackett will, with immediate effect, take a period of leave from her duties as board deputy convener while the matter is investigated.

"The CNPA will not be issuing any further statement on the matter until the conclusion of the investigation."

Following a backlash over the incident, Ms Blackett

posted on Facebook that she was 'pretty stressed and very tired' and would be 'taking a break'.

A spokesperson for the SNP Aberdeenshire group said: "Our group leader was made aware of the comment on Wednesday night and immediately spoke with Councillor Blackett.

"Councillor Blackett advised that the comment was meant to be a joke that stems from when Mr Bowie sent her an offensive email.

"However, councillor Blackett understands it was in bad taste. She has deleted the comment and has apologised to Mr Bowie."

Four years ago Mr Bowie, then chief of staff to Liam Kerr MP had to issue an 'unreserved apology' after labelling councillor Blackett a 'flipping woman'.

She had asked Mr Kerr to lend his support to a motor neurone disease charity campaign.

A park authority spokeswoman told the Strathly yesterday that their own investigation was still ongoing into the matter.

The Cairngorm National Park Authority

Board investigation was completed very quickly. The same day this article appeared the CNPA convener, Xander McDade, announced ([see here](#)) that the Board's Risk and Audit Committee had decided that *the potential of a breach of the Code of Conduct should be referred to the Standards Commission*, the body responsible for ethical standards in public life.

The contrast between the rapid action by the CNPA Board and how the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park Authority responded to the Owen McKee case six years ago is quite striking ([see here](#)). Words, said in the heat of the moment are one thing, but Owen McKee had deliberately traded in the shares of Scotlgold, the company wanting to develop the goldmine at Cononish, while convener of the LLTNPA Planning Committee. Under his aegis the Committee had approved a revised planning application to enable the development to go ahead. In my view that is far more serious than words exchanged as part of a long-standing feud between councillors both of whom were once members of the Tory Party.

The LLTNPA Board and Scottish Government ([see here](#)), however, covered up the Owen McKee case, approving a report in secret and failing to refer the matter to the Standards Commission. After I referred the matter to the Standards Commission they then found that Mr McKee had clearly breached the Code of Ethical Standards in Public Life and, had he not been forced to resign by coverage from Rob Edwards in the Sunday Herald, they would have suspended him for a year.

The difference between how the two National Park Authorities have responded to the Blakett and McKee cases is striking. The Blakett case supports my argument at the time that the LLTNPA Board, under then convener Linda McKay and the man who is now Chief Executive, Gordon Watson, should have referred the matter to the Standards Commission. There has been no inquiry by the LLTNPA into their failings or the failings of the then Board and, to rub salt into the wound, Mr McKee then stood for election to the LLTNPA Board again in 2018 ([see here](#)).

Current concerns about the LLTNPA Board

When elected as new convener to replace Linda McKay in 2017, James Stuart – the new boy to the Board – had a golden opportunity to sort out the corrupt governance at the LLTNPA ([see here](#)). For example, the manipulated consultation process that had led up to the extension of the camping byelaws and a planning system that puts the private interests of developers before the statutory objectives of the National Park. Three years later, after failing to address any of these issues and after being unanimously re-elected as Park Convener for another three years in December 2019, Mr Stuart appears to have gone absent without leave:

James Angus STUART

Filter appointments

Current appointments

default watermark

Total number of appointments 1

Date of birth

June 1979

ONE PLANET CONSULTING LTD (12544960)

Company status

Active

Correspondence address

4 Burleigh Place,

Role **ACTIVE**

Director

Appointed on

2 April 2020

James Stuart set up One Planet Consulting on 1st April 2020. Just when he moved to England is unclear. But there has, as far as I am aware, never been any public declaration of this move at a Board Meeting or in publicly available documents and it is not mentioned on his Register of Interests ([see here](#)).

In my view this raises serious issues about Mr Stuart's ability to act effectively as convener of the LLTNPA and to carry out his other Scottish appointments. Being based in Darlington, his ability to spend much time in either the National Park HQ or the National Park itself has been severely compromised. Either his involvement will be governance by zoom meetings or the public purse will have to foot the bill for considerably increased travel expenses. As important as being seen to lead, which requires regular direct contact with National Park Authority staff and stakeholders, the conveners of our National Park Boards need to know what is going on on the ground. Being out and about in the National Park should be a requisite for the job. It is almost impossible to do that while based in Darlington. The same argument applies to Mr Stuart's other appointments in Scotland, including that of non-Executive Adviser to Scottish Forestry.

It's Mr Stuart's right to decide to move to England but in my view an honourable person would at the very least have provided a public explanation about why they considered they were able to continue to fulfil these roles in absentia. And if the move took place AFTER Mr Stuart had been re-elected convener, he should have given the Board the opportunity to decide whether he was still able to hold that position. Mr Stuart's failure to be open about his move provides yet another example of a major cover-up in the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park.

It's not just Mr Stuart, however, who now governs in absentia. Dr Sarah Drummond, like Mr Stuart appointed to the Board by the Scottish Government, also appears to have moved to England. According to information on twitter, she appears to have bought a house in Hackney, east London (after apparently moving from London to the west country for the Covid-19 lockdown):

@rufflemuffin and I bought a house! Welcome to the world weird little soon-to-be-palm-springs-on-hackney bungalow. (tweet 16th May passed on to parkswatch).

Rufflemuffin ([see here](#)) is one of the many undertakings Dr Drummond claims to be involved in.

On her Register of Interests ([see here](#)), Dr Drummond declares she is a Director of two companies:

Dr Sarah Drummond

Sarah Drummond has been appointed to the Park Authority for 10 years as of 1 November 2018 until the 31 October 2028

Dr Sarah Drummond co-founded service design specialists Snowflake Scotland, Alloa Pride and The Matter. She has experience supporting public and third sector to deliver better services by transforming how they deliver services and bringing digital practices to the fore to change how they operate on tourism projects around Edinburgh festivals, research into digital marketing innovative events with partners like The Data Lab in Scotland. She has led multi-disciplinary teams in local areas to reduce barriers to cycling.

Register of Interests

- **Category 1: Remuneration**
 - Director – Northgate Public Services Ltd
- **Category 2: Related Undertakings**
 - Director – Cyclehack Ltd: Events organisation focusing on innovation

Northgate Public Services Ltd, whose registered office is in Hemel Hempstead, lists two directors on the Companies House website and neither is Dr Drummond ([see here](#)). Nor is there any mention of her

among the listing of Board Members on the website of Northgate Public Services ([see here](#)) but perhaps its a different company?

As for Cyclehack, Sarah Drummond submitted a voluntary application in April for the company, registered in Glasgow, to be struck off the Register at Companies House ([see here](#)). But for the present, it is still listed as an active company, so her register of interests is accurate in that respect.

Just like James Stuart, it's very hard to see how Sarah Drummond can do her job effectively if based in London. It would be in the public interest for the LLTNPA, like Highlands and Islands Enterprise, now to start publishing the expenses claims of all Board Members. The LLTNPA also, unlike the CNPA, pays all Board Members automatically with no account given of how much work they have actually done. Dr Drummond's move adds to the argument that it would be in the public interest for all Board Members in the LLTNPA to have to submit records of how much work they have actually done.

There was a time, when the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park was first set up, that even those living in Edinburgh were seen as living too far away. That has now all changed. There may be nothing in the law to prevent Board Members from moving out of Scotland, but an open and honest public authority would have ensured that this information had been made public. That the LLTNPA has conspicuously failed to do.

While the CNPA may have failed to tackle the issues which really matter, such as wildlife persecution by the big landowners or Highlands and Islands Enterprise's mismanagement at Cairn Gorm, their governance when it comes to Board matters is way ahead of the LLTNPA. The Geva Blakett case provides further evidence for that. Unfortunately, I can't ever see the Scottish Government stepping in to sort out the failures in governance at the LLTNPA Board. The civil servants have consistently ignored all reports about issues of concern and the main hope of reforming the LLTNPA lies with the Scottish Parliament.

Category

1. Cairngorms
2. Loch Lomond and Trossachs

Tags

1. CNPA
2. Governance
3. LLTNPA
4. Scottish Government

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