



Local representative or puppet of the Scottish Government?

The reality of 'local representation' on National Park Authority Boards

The Galloway National Park Association have emphasised the local focus of the proposed new National Park which *'could assist local democracy...and contribute to the desired de-centralisation of power.'*¹ They claim a new National Park would *'work with our communities to give them a strong voice in their future through the National Park Board and Partnership Plan.'* However, these claims are completely disingenuous and do not stand up to any degree of scrutiny.

National Parks are run by a Park Authority, an executive non-departmental public body (NDPB.) As such they are directly accountable to Scottish Ministers, not the community the park is located within. The decision-making body of a Park Authority is its Board, with the Park Chief Executive being solely responsible for operational issues. However, experience shared by former Board members indicates that it takes a very strong Board and Convener to ensure that the Board is in control and actually making the decisions.

Guidance for NDPB Board Members² states one of the main functions of a Board is to *'Ensure that the strategy and plans are aligned with the National Performance Framework³ and the public body's statutory duties, and the policies and priorities of the Scottish Government'*. So, instead of *'assisting local democracy'* and *'contributing to the decentralisation of power'* it actually establishes central Government control.

The reality of what this means for locally elected Board Members of National Parks has been shared by a recent former Board member of the Cairngorms National Park Authority. They explained that, *"the constraints of the 'local' role were made clear from the outset, when it was highlighted that directly elected members were there to bring a local perspective - NOT to represent those that voted them in to position"*. In fact, the Guidance for Board Members states, *'In circumstances where it is considered appropriate, a mix of Board membership is generally designed to deliver a balance between local and national representation in the decision-making process. However, regardless of composition, all Boards are expected to play a key role in the delivery of the Scottish Government's Purpose through alignment with the National Performance Framework.'* These are national rather than local or Park specific outcomes.

The former CNPA Board member went on to state that, *"the balance of numbers on the Board between appointees and directly elected members meant that the directly elected could not really ensure their voice was acted on. Also, as it is the Minister who calls the shots and awards the grant in aid [funding] on*

¹ It's Our Time GNPA May 2019

² On Board: A Guide for Board Members of Statutory Boards

³ The Scottish Government's 'vision for a successful Scotland'

*condition that the Chief Executive fulfils those shots, this effectively renders the Board to be **mere puppets of the Government.***"

There is also evidence from the existing National Parks which suggests that if board members are deemed to represent a 'constituency' such as farming, they can be excluded from board discussions of that issue. They are regarded as having a 'vested interest' in the topic under discussion. This potentially undermines the position of any Board member who has specific expertise which could inform discussion of these issues.

The current NatureScot consultation proposes several options on the makeup of the proposed Park Board. It states, '*at least 60% of Board members would be local representatives*' to '*strengthen local representation and participation in decision-making within the Park area.*' Superficially this appears to offer some local control and accountability, however the Guidance for Board Members, and the experience of locally elected Board members clearly demonstrates that this is nothing more than a smoke screen.

This precedence of a 'national' view of priorities over the aspirations and wishes of local communities reflects the thinking of proponents of a new National Park in Galloway. The Scottish Campaign for National Parks and Action to Protect Rural Scotland have previously made it abundantly clear that in their view a national agenda must override the wishes of local communities, '*It is vital that National Parks should as a matter of principle give priority to both the national interest and long-term thinking over short termism and potentially narrower local interests*'⁴.

Make no mistake 'local representation' on Park Boards has nothing to do with local accountability. It is a cunning disguise for the imposition of Central Government control.

⁴ Future National Parks in Scotland Possible Governance Models SCNP APRS 2015