

PE2089/D: Stop More National Parks in Scotland

Petitioner written submission, 03 September 2024

It is with great disappointment that we note the response to the requests in our petition from Cabinet Secretary Mairi Gougeon, dated 21 August 2024.

We find it very hard to understand her refusal to commit to an independent review and analysis of the existing national parks, and her letter again wholly fails to respond to the central omission from the entire approach of her government to their operation.

Ms Gougeon correctly says there are plans and board members, but these are not independent, and it is our understanding from engagement with some board members that they are all required to support the park. It is also our understanding that in one park there is a series of complaints and disputes between members and the CEO.

Further, several elected members on the "local" element of the board claim they must comply with the CEO's wishes. In other words, they must toe the line. If the locally elected members of the board cannot represent the interests of local people, then any claim that the national parks are democratically accountable is little more than a sham.

Such allegations themselves should be worthy of an independent investigation, but in the 21 years of their existence there has never been an independent analysis and review of how the parks have performed. This is a major failing.

Further, a recent poll by a local community forum asked its members if the Cairngorm National Park had performed well and 92 per cent said No. Only 3 per cent said it had, so surely a curious minister about to launch a third national park would want to find out why there was such overwhelming concern.

We find it extraordinary to read that Ms Gougeon is not provisionally open to independently reviewing the existing national park and opening its performance to public scrutiny, nor polling the residents and businesses in the national park areas to find out how they now feel about their impact.

But it's abundantly clear from surveys conducted by residents, the NFUS, crofting communities and businesses that there is great concern and discontent from within these existing parks. Perhaps Ms Gougeon does not trust these results, so surely the best way to verify their findings or otherwise is to conduct fully independent research.

Now the Scottish Government has decided to press ahead with the proposed Galloway national park, common sense surely dictates that an impartial assessment of the existing two parks should be conducted so residents can reach a considered view in full possession of all the facts?

Unless there is something to hide, surely Galloway's people are entitled to an independent assessment if the current consultation is to be of any genuine value? As it stands, they are being presented with a one-sided government policy and the national parks authorities' self-marked homework. That cannot be right.

It only makes sense if the Scottish Government intends to proceed even if residents in the proposed Galloway park area oppose it, which is surprising from a party which believes the people of Scotland should decide their own fate and future. Surely Gallovidians cannot be excluded from that, unless SNP ministers think they know better than ordinary local people?

It is unclear how exactly NatureScot will assess or determine whether there is or is not sufficient support to proceed with the Galloway park so why not ask the people in a referendum?

We know the Scottish Government wants another national park, but the consultation cannot be skewed to produce a pre-ordained result, and the only way NatureScot can guarantee it too is not biased is by a referendum, or at least by commissioning a demonstrably independent, in-depth survey. For such a far-reaching decision, there can be no suggestion of a stitch-up.

If it is the case that conducting an accurate measurement of opinion in Galloway would be too costly, then the logical course of action is to abandon a plan which otherwise risks dragging the majority into a national park against their will.

In the existing park areas, an independent review of their operations is the least people in those areas deserve, and we would respectfully urge the committee to uphold our petition.

