



COMMENT

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# We need to fight for Killiecrankie once again

MAGNUS LINKLATER

Historic Scotland should be trying harder to scupper plans for a dual carriageway over the famous Jacobite battlefield



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**W**hat do you think, I asked the chap from Historic Scotland, about the obliteration of one of our most famous battlefields? He hesitated. Come on, I said, they're planning to drive a dual carriageway through the braes of Killiecrankie, a place of pilgrimage for any self-respecting Jacobite, the site of a great rebel victory, hallowed ground, a cornerstone of our past history. What are you going to do about it?

He mumbled something indistinct, about not knowing enough about the detailed plans, and said the matter was "under consideration".

Ye gods! If the organisation whose prime purpose in life is to



more closely at the impenetrable explanation from Transport Scotland, who intend to cover the key fighting area of Killiecrankie with tarmac, and place massive lay-bys over the place where Bonnie Dundee's charging Highlanders put the government's cavalry to flight. They had, it seemed, "consulted" Historic Environment Scotland (HES, as it is now known) before drawing up the plans. So the details were indeed known, and Transport Scotland had been given the nod by the very body which should be opposing them.

I wondered what the estimable Jane Ryder, who chairs HES, and knows more about public bodies than most people in Scotland, might think about all this? I looked at her statement in the annual report. "We are responsible for the stewardship of sites and artefacts which reflect the millennia of Scottish history: as such we are accountable to both present and future generations," it said. So, Jane, is Killiecrankie part of the "millennia of Scottish history" or is it not?

Time was when Historic Scotland was a force to be reckoned with: it vetoed Disney-style castles, forbade the use of modern stonework, preferred ruins to reconstruction. Then, in 2014, it was dissolved, and reconstituted, with environment (dread word) as part of its remit. It had long since swallowed up the brilliant Royal Commission on Historic and Ancient Monuments, which really knew its stuff and has been documenting Scotland's past since 1908.

Now, if its mission statement is to be believed, it is more concerned with those mantras of official jargon — "a responsibility to demonstrate our accountability, transparency



There is a larger issue here. Scotland's non-departmental public bodies (NDPBs) should be independently minded but many seem incapable of challenging government policy, or speaking out in defence of their areas of concern. In the course of walking the battle site last weekend, we encountered a somewhat bedraggled group from another NDPB — the Cairngorm National Park Authority, within whose territory Killiecrankie lies. Surely they must be against the desecration of the site? They shook their collective head. They were more concerned with "landscape" than history, they said, and moved doggedly on.

There are 38 executive NDPBs in Scotland, which collectively cost the taxpayer close on £3 billion a year. They fulfil important roles, and no one, of course, would expect them to be a permanently carping lot. Why would Skills Development Scotland (£183.5 million) or Highlands and Islands Airports (£35.4 million) or the Care Inspectorate (£21.7 million) be voices of radical protest? We might, however, expect a bit more from Architecture and Design Scotland (£1.68 million) about the appalling design of so many of our housing developments; or the Scottish Funding Council (£1.6 billion) about government interference in the running of universities; or sportscotland (£34.2 million) about the way so many playing areas are being built over — potential football fields buried under concrete.

It is a fine irony that the one body among the 38 which truly does make its views known, and is a thorn in the flesh of both national and local government, is self-funding. Audit Scotland, otherwise known as the Accounts Commission, charges local



unequivocal about its role: “We operate impartially and independently of councils and the Scottish government, and we meet and report in public,” proclaims its mission statement. Not a bad pronouncement from an organisation which really does hold officials to account.

Where then does the erosion of the independent public voice stem from? It can, perhaps, be traced back to the early days of devolution, and the steady decline in the influence of the Scottish civil service. In the 1980s and 1990s, top civil servants like William Kerr Fraser, Sir Russell Hillhouse or Sir Alastair Muir Russell were widely recognised figures, whose views could be forthright and were often aired in public. Gradually, as successive Scottish administrations, both Labour and SNP, tightened their hold on the civil service, regarding it as an arm of government rather than a body offering objective advice, these top names were submerged. Who has heard of Sir Peter Housden, permanent secretary under Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, or his successor, Leslie Evans? Neither is known to the public, or dares speak out on anything other than the blandest aspects of civil service duties. Hardly surprising, then, that organisations further down the chain, which were once led by forthright Scots who spoke their mind and cared little about what governments thought, should now be cowering behind a succession of rules and regulations, unwilling to risk their budgets, even on matters of basic principle; it is a sad reflection of public life in Scotland today.

Meanwhile, there’s a historic site to be saved. It would be a national disgrace if the blood-soaked battleground of Killiecrankie, where the Jacobite rebellion began and so nearly



the rest of us. “Ye Jacobites, by name, lend an ear . . .” as the song goes.

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**Gerry** 2 hours ago

Historic Scotland is locally known as 'Hysterical Scotland'. It's main purpose seems to be to provide employment in our socialist state.

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**Freddie Moran** 3 hours ago

Well said, depressing, and worrying - good for Audit Scotland.

1 Recommend Reply

**Whiteshark** 4 hours ago

Sorry !.....I read this article because I thought it was about getting rid of the Krankies!

1 Recommend Reply

**Kinmont** 6 hours ago

Got my vote.

2 Recommend Reply

**Peter Wright** 10 hours ago