

SUBMISSION FROM CHAS MacDONALD

I would like to make some points regarding the entirety of the management of Homecoming 2014, most especially by VisitScotland and EventScotland. I realise that the remit of the committee meeting is more narrowly defined to the Bannockburn event, however, in my opinion it would be pointless to consider the latter without its history being considered.

Unfortunately, it is a tale of woe, from beginning to end.

I work with an organisation of heritage bodies in Lochaber, mostly OSCR registered charitable organisations, and one which is a charity, based in Prince Edward Island, Canada.

Having missed out on funding in 2009, we resolved to do something of meaning and value for 2014. In January 2011, I had a conversation with a prominent member of the diaspora which kicked off thinking about what we could do in Lochaber. It took some working through, but by August 2011 we were moving and I made contact with EventScotland, who promised a reply when plans were being formulated. At that point websites informed us stakeholders were going to be gathered together to plan things. We held a public meeting in November, formed constituted in February 2012, and were planning in earnest.

Eight and a half months passed from first contact without reply. Meantime, the Saltire Society held a conference in Parliament where Prof. Brian Hay asserted it was becoming too late to do proper work to promote and plan a useful year of activity.

Even at this point it was obvious we had a very strong programme of events, and needed all our time to plan properly. We are not only holding events, we are also building a very large, rich database of family history connections relating specifically to our area, in order to encourage visitors from the diaspora.

I contacted Tom Chambers shortly after his appointment, asking for an early meeting with ES in order to help us understand the application process, given that £3m had been set aside for 2014. To contextualise: when we had been turned down in 2009, it was because we were a Highland games. Then we found other games' had received money, so we wanted to be sure that we were pitching correctly, and that there would no 'misunderstandings'. Mr Chambers' reply was as follows:

... at present we are building the team and as such not able to deal with every enquiry... We will have a read your document by early next week and get back to you, but the funding application process has to be adhered too [sic] or every event organisers [sic] will have issues that are urgent. Unless the event is of a scale that will bring tens of thousands from outside Scotland the funding process and timescales must be the route we engage with events.

Chambers, email 19-04-2012

Or to paraphrase, unless you are bringing in tens of thousands of visitors, wait in line. Meanwhile, we'll get on with building the team.

Offhand is an inadequate word for it. Dismissive and patronising is more like it. After all, I had been working on it for fifteen months by this point, and I knew that further waiting was going to make things more difficult.

Eventually I was granted a meeting with a new boy at EventScotland only a week or so in post, and who was very sympathetic. However, he organised a meeting of the two of us, VisitScotland, and Ancestral Tourism. Only he and I bothered to turn up; the meeting room he had booked was double booked; and I had to do my pitch in a corridor. His advice was that nothing we were planning was fundable. Although I make this submission as a private individual, I will attach the latest version of our proposed activities, and you can judge their response for yourself.

Given the shambles, I resorted to the Minister. Our events are not only worthy of funding, they are going to bring in significant resources, not least a £1.7m genealogy database which is being donated to us, at no cost, from a Canadian group. However, the Minister was 'unable' to talk to me. I again requested a Ministerial meeting, given my concerns. Still rejected.

Having planned our events stream to come off the end of the Stirling Gathering, we were devastated to hear it had been pulled. We picked ourselves up, but the diaspora went into complete meltdown. Groups who were booked began cancelling (those that could). The US clans association, left in an information vacuum, began to talk of rescheduling to 2015.

The final nail in the coffin, for me, was the appearance of Mike Cantlay in front of your committee on October 31st 2012, where he dissembled to draw a distinction between the Gathering and the Year of Homecoming.

"... people often put the two words gathering and homecoming together and actually they are two quite different concepts. Now, there won't be a Gathering as such, but Homecoming is a celebration which goes on all year..."

Cantlay, EET, 31-10-2013

http://news.bbc.co.uk/democracylive/hi/scotland/newsid_9764000/9764437.stm

Lawyers would not disagree they are different – one is a concept, the other is an event – but it is no less misleading to try to separate the two and wave it off as a mere detail. The irrefutable evidence is in the carnage of the Stirling Débauché. It is a simply unsustainable position to suggest the Gathering and the Homecoming are not one and the same, to the Homecoming audience. We might not concur with the association in the minds of US citizens, but it is there and we have to deal with it.

There are two ways to look at this: either Mr. Cantlay does not fully understand the market sector, one in which he is responsible for spending of £3m of public money, or; he wilfully attempted to mislead your committee, and by doing so, Parliament. In the first scenario, his fitness to hold the office he does must be in question. In the second he must surely be expected to abide by the same rules elected officials do, and deliberate misleading of Parliament is intolerable. It seems to me that much is entirely plain and irrefutable.

Furthermore, his understanding was the clan societies, namely SCSC and COSCA were very happy with Bannockburn being mobilised to help. Your deliberations may prove otherwise, but the veracity of that statement bears little scrutiny for me.

The Gathering was the icon event. 'Signature event' would be to undervalue its significance. Edinburgh's Hogmanay fireworks will be a signature event, as will

Bannockburn, Glamis, the Clan Convention (if they happen). But the Gathering is the icon event most clearly conveying the Homecoming message to vast swathes of the diaspora. It's like dismissing the opening ceremony of the Olympics as a signature event. It is not. It encapsulates the entire meaning for the audience.

For there to have been no information six weeks out from Stone Mountain Games, and what should have been the start of the more intense part of the communications campaign, was quite simply negligent. EventScotland ought to have been all over the Gathering, and in full possession of the facts. It matters not one whit that it was another body holding it. The spending of £3m of public money was heavily tied up with the Gathering, and EventScotland had a duty to have been better aware of its progress. I spoke with the previous administration's Provost in Stirling, and I know for a fact that ES had been involved significantly ahead of the May elections. Other information, and, granted, it's second hand, was that ES and VS were just as surprised by the demise of the Gathering, and went into total panic upon hearing the news.

For them to have been so out of the loop on its core trajectory is simply unacceptable. Albeit that Tom Chambers is now with another organisation spending much more public money in 2014, his incompetence should be censured by the Committee. That aside, once again Mike Cantlay is found at the head of an organisation incompetent to its duty to disburse public funds in a manner appropriate to the task.

Turning to the Bannockburn events being touted as a replacement for the Gathering, it is clear to anybody who wants to listen, that they are a fundamentally inadequate compromise. In my view it is unhelpful to criticise the National Trust for Scotland in most respects in this matter. They are doing the best they can, as an organisation with charitable aims and a limited pot of money, as well as an event priority not core aligned to filling the Stirling gap. I suspect the National Trust will look back on the entire Stirling Débauché and ponder why got caught up in a series of compromises, thought through on the back of a fantasy, by an organisation (VS), trying to extricate itself from a dung heap partly of their own making, smelling of rosewater.

Let's be clear: the appetite for a half baked clan village, and what amounts to some overgrown children running raggedy round a field with wooden swords, yelling gibsonesque oaths in daft facepaint, is fairly much non-existent. As anybody who talks to the diaspora knows, they wanted a big gathering and a big march, before a big exodus to other places. Instead, to use the appropriate Scots term, they have been given a great big doozie.

I'd like to take that as the stepping off point for looking ahead. There are significant structural issues with the entire Homecoming adventure. The idea is brilliant, but the execution is deadly. The Scots, in general terms, don't 'get' the gathering sort of thing, and are ambivalent about the Homecoming because it holds all sorts of Brigadoon meanings for them. Conversely, the diaspora, in general terms, have an erroneous conception of Scotland, articulated in questionable iconography and cultural practices. I would argue this to be broadly agreed at the sharp end of the heritage sector. But it's where we are at, and we do have to respect the diaspora's right to formulate that part of the identity of Scottishness.

Furthermore, the diaspora is fed up being seen as a cash cow, to be milked at every opportunity. They dearly love Scotland, and the identity they have wrapped up in it. They want, so strongly, to visit and find their roots. But they don't want to spend their every last penny on it, being drip fed some titbits every time they get here. They want to be able to come, discover, and belong. The rest of it is a fun distraction, but still a distraction.

Why VisitScotland came up with a concept of an ancestry year which focuses on all the other stuff covered in the previous years, is a perfect mystery. They have simply misunderstood that ancestry is about person to person contacts, people, and place. Why they have taken so long – and at the time of writing this, we still don't know who is getting funding amongst the 160 applications Mike Cantlay mentioned – to get down to the business of allowing people and groups the freedom to make plans which encourage the development of an economic cultural model which recognises the small scale, high volume nature of ancestry, is anybody's guess.

The database we are building in west Lothian will take years to get to completion. We have lost a year already. A year which involves training and compiling. Guide activity and resources (commercial and economic activities) need to be developed to help every visitor. That takes time. That is a year in which we have had to put off making other funding applications because of the instability as a result of EventScotland's ridiculous dismissal of our aims, and the Stirling Débacle.

It would be disingenuous to criticise VisitScotland for getting behind the Gathering. It's not theirs to suppress, even if they have been incompetent in how they use and support it to best effect. But, the mega-event is both a feast and a curse. It keeps awareness up, it encourages visits and cultural exchange, and it provides motivation at a variety of economic and cultural levels. On the other hand, it centres activity around a specific time point – oddly in the centre of the current season, rather than at the shoulders (a clear aim of VS). It drives massive amounts of activity and resource into a very short time space, meaning we all have to work on top of each other to make a small mark. It localises activity in the Central Belt. And it gives the oxygen of mass appeal to a rather fraught idea of Scottishness.

Most significant is the central belt localising. Unquestionably gatherings are important, but the mega-event is counterproductive. Supporting regions to develop their own significant gatherings would be more productive. It would encourage the greater engagement with the things that matter to the diaspora. This stuff needs to get out into the Borders, into the Highlands, the islands, the east coast communities. There needs to be a direct engagement between the people of Scotland and the diaspora, which circumvents the old notions wrapped up in castellated towns, by bringing people together. Scotland, furth of the middle, doesn't really feel that it is involved in it. It's just another pageant 'down there'. Which is why there should be little support for the Bannockburn drama.

As an aside, the quinquennial timescale is simply wrong, but that's for another day.

If I might finish this with a comment upon the lack of involvement from Ministers. I am still entirely livid with Fergus Ewing for refusing to meet with me at my first request. It was plain to me, then, that things were going very awry. Alas, if only he had listened. It is simply not good enough that a Minister of the Crown does not meet with a citizen who has more than adequately demonstrated the need for a review of matters

involving high levels of public spending. Somebody commented recently that VisitScotland had simply been pulling the wool over Ministers' eyes. I have no doubt that the ministerial team investigated my complaints with VisitScotland at the time. One can only surmise that VisitScotland assured them that I was just an unfortunate with a bad attack of sour grapes. Shame I've been proven right, and Scotland has been made to look like bumbling incompetents in the eyes of friends around the world, and all at the hands of people who should be better.

But to compound his error, the Right Honourable Mr. Ewing, delivered a stern lecture to assembled clan organisations on February 1st that we needed to understand that money could not just be handed out willy nilly with no return. A colleague commented that he came across as plain rude. Personally I found him plain patronising. As it is, the organisation I work with has two genealogical archives promised to us for free, which have a combined nominal value of £2.6m, the larger one (£1.7m) being donated from Canada. Yet EventScotland could not see any way that this database, and our events stream, could be supported to realise the phenomenal value and enhanced tax take that will accrue to Scotland from those precious gifts.

It seems that building the team is far more important than building a strong sector. VE/ES' utterly hidebound, top down, process driven approach to helping little people with big ideas and even bigger capacities, is causing far more damage than good. Haven't they heard of the crowd at Ocean Drive yet? Instead, they will batter on with a half baked spectacular in Bannockburn, which will do everything to disappoint everybody, and little to enthuse anybody. Raise you glasses for anodyne.

Chas Mac Donald
February 2013