

A Strong Coherent Voice

*The First Two Decades of Scottish Environment Link –
and some thoughts for the next two decades*

**NB: This longer version is for internal use by
members only. An edited version for wider
dissemination will be published before November 07.**

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(23,700 words!)

“If there was no Scottish LINK, someone would have to invent it.”
(widely-quoted aphorism)

“LINK allows member organisations the possibility of punching above their weight, by drawing on the support, knowledge and experience available in the network”
(John Pringle, former LINK vice-chair)

“LINK is the fundamental mouthpiece of the conservation movement in Scotland”
(Roger Crofts, former Chief Executive, Scottish Natural Heritage)

“LINK presents a coherent voice to the environment movement, which forces politicians to give it recognition and respect.”
(Robin Pellew, ex-Chief Executive, National Trust for Scotland)

“Without LINK, Scotland would be much further behind in reflecting the environmental mainstream.”
(Simon Pepper, ex-Director, WWF Scotland)

1. THE 20-YEAR JOURNEY

1.1: Genesis

On 3rd February 1987, nineteen stalwarts from voluntary Scottish environmental bodies met in the Waverley Hotel in Perth for the inaugural meeting of what was then called the Scottish Wildlife and Countryside Link. It was the beginning of a momentous twenty-year journey, from what would probably then have been viewed as a slightly cranky special-interest group to an organisation today that is widely respected as a key player in a Civic Scotland in which environmental issues are regarded as mainstream concerns, and have been adopted, to varying degrees, by all the political parties in the May 2007 Scottish parliamentary election.

The fourteen organisations that agreed to sign up to the new body on that February day ranged from influential, large groups like the RSPB, National Trust for Scotland and what was then called the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), to small local groups like the Avonside Conservation Group (represented by Sir Edward and Lady Peck) and the Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group, and bodies with very specific remits such as the Scottish Rights of Way Society. Critically, it encompassed both wildlife bodies and countryside bodies, while Friends of the Earth Scotland espoused a wider international environmental perspective.

David Minns of the RSPB chaired that first meeting, and was elected unopposed as the new body’s interim chair. Drennan Watson, representing the North East Mountain Trust, was elected as vice-chair and Roger Smith of the Scottish Wild Land Group agreed to take on the post of treasurer.

These individuals were already well-used to working together, because the origins of LINK can be traced back seven years earlier to the first campaign to stop the development of skiing in the Northern Cairngorms, including Lurcher's Gully. Several conservation bodies got together to fight the proposal, and, unusually, some of them shared counsel at the resulting 1981 public inquiry with the government conservation body, the Nature Conservation Council. Regular planning meetings were held to discuss tactics, and all the participants welcomed the benefits that came from shared inspiration.

Guided in particular by Drennan Watson, the campaign group decided to focus not just on the specific conservation value of the land concerned, but on wider policy issues – the fact, for example, that the planning application was being considered in a policy vacuum, without any national planning guidelines to cover ski developments. This approach was seen as audacious in its day. Watson later wrote:-

“The joint case presented by the objectors was formidable, there is no other word for it! It not only sustained their environmental arguments, it demolished the economic, strategic and design base of the proposed development with an embarrassing thoroughness.”

The Campaign was successful: on December 16th 1982, the Secretary of State for Scotland announced his decision not to approve the development of downhill skiing in the northern corries on the grounds that it would “change the character of the site and diminish the qualities which are the basis of its importance, beyond the measure which the benefits would justify” – in other words, drawing both on the campaign's evidence of the landscape and wildlife value of the corries and of the economic failings of the proposal.

Simon Pepper – previously Director of WWF Scotland and a founder of LINK – says it is difficult to underestimate the sense of triumph in this victory. By acting together, the various objecting bodies had been much more than the sum of their parts. The individuals involved had enjoyed the experience of bouncing ideas off each other, and valued the innovative approaches that emerged as a result of this process. Drennan Watson in particular had an inspirational role, challenging the preconceptions of the more established conservation bodies and coaxing them into a new assertiveness.

Following on from this experience, Watson wrote to a range of voluntary countryside bodies sometime in 1982 (the letter is undated), proposing that the working associations developed at the inquiry should be continued. Referring to the inquiry, he wrote:-

“Firstly, I think the value of the co-operation between the recreational groups, and also between them and the wildlife protection bodies, was realised by all. We learned much from each other, and greatly increased our overall impact by intelligent co-operation. These lessons can surely be applied to other issues too... I write to suggest therefore that representatives of the various voluntary bodies might meet in informal discussion in the

very near future to examine this, and whatever other broader topics they regard as relevant, and I would be pleased to have your reaction to my proposal”.

The bulk of the letter referred to possible Cairngorms developments post-Lurcher’s, including compromises that the Secretary of State for Scotland might propose in response to the inquiry outcome, but the seeds were sown for a much wider coalition on countryside issues. The immediate result was the establishment of regular informal meetings of what was called the ‘Round Table’. Bob Aitken, representing the Scottish Countryside Activities Council, recalls these as “interminable meetings in the (then) seedy Waverley Hotel”, but they established a way of working that was of lasting value.

Organisations that attended these early meetings included:-

- Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group (BSCG)
- British Association of Nature Conservationists (BANC)
- Friends of the Earth Scotland (FoES)
- National Trust for Scotland (NTS)
- North East Mountain Trust (NEMT)
- Mountaineering Council of Scotland (MCoS)
- Ramblers Association (RA)
- Royal Society for the Protection of Birds (RSPB);
- Scottish Conservation Projects (SCP)
- Scottish Countryside Activities Trust (SCAC)
- Scottish Wild Land Group (SWLG)
- Scottish Wildlife Trust (SWT)
- World Wildlife Fund (WWF)

No formal records exist of the early meetings, but Bob Aitken’s records suggest that the first meeting to establish the Round Table was in mid-1983, and regular meetings were definitely underway by January 1984, in a roughly quarterly pattern.

Simon Pepper sees the “extraordinary serendipity” of the individuals involved at this stage as critical. Drennan Watson was the “scarred campaigner, with strong sensibilities about the user community” (he had developed new techniques in a successful campaign to see off a major quarry proposal for Longhaven Cliffs in Aberdeenshire, which had focussed not just on the impact of the quarry itself but more widely on the economic credentials of its developer). Bob Aitken brought a more intellectual approach, but represented the strong Scottish culture of hillwalking, along with David Grosz of the Ramblers Association. David Minns had strong business management and PR skills, but also brought a clear sense of reality. Xanthe Jay, of Friends of the Earth Scotland also left her mark: young and vivacious, she

wore bright jumpers, not grey suits. She was an enthusiastic and imaginative campaigner, with strong affinities to people, and no time for pomposity or the niceties of procedure – Bob Aitken recollects that her attitude was that the whole system was wrong, so she was always ready to challenge safe assumptions at meetings. With other ‘young Turks’ from the British Association of Nature Conservationists, she helped ensure that the new body avoided bogging itself unnecessarily in formalities.

Bob Aitken thinks that the choice of Watson as chairman was particularly important: “By the time of Lurchers, Drennan had revolutionised ideas of what was possible for the voluntary sector. He had changed our perspective of what was possible, not least because of his superior intellect and intelligence to the people we were opposing.”

Aitken and others also see the role of Simon Pepper as critical. After a year as a fundraiser for the WWF, he had shifted to a policy role in 1986. This was a huge innovation for WWF, which had previously operated exclusively on the international stage and viewed Scotland only as a source of money, not a conservation priority. Simon Pepper, more than anyone, saw the need to draw conservation into the mainstream – and he saw that individual bodies competing for members and media attention was not the way to do this.

Down in London, a precedent had already been set in 1980 with the establishment of a partnership called Wildlife Link (WL), that had evolved from the earlier Council for Nature and the Council for Environmental Conservation (it was formally constituted in 1982, when a separate Countryside Link was also established, and the two did not merge until 1993).

In April 1986, a delegation from WL, led by the organisation’s chair Lord Peter Melchett (also a member of the WWF Council), came to Scotland to investigate the potential for financial support for a new body to extend the reach of WL northwards. The group also included Chris Tydeman from WWF and Hazel Phillips, the WL Secretary. They visited Duich Moss on Islay, the scene of another major conservation battle at the time, spent a day in the Cairngorms with Drennan Watson, and attended a meeting of the Round Table.

Watson was not hugely impressed by the group, which he saw as an English takeover bid. As he drove them from Perth to Rothiemurchus, he found it difficult to engage them in the ecological history of the area, and he said the only time they became really animated was when he took them to the ski area and they “went nuts in the snow”.

After their visit, Chris Tydeman wrote up the group’s conclusions in a paper called *Scotland: A Case for Treatment* – a patronising title that infuriated Simon Pepper, even if he welcomed the paper’s conclusions. It has not been possible to trace a copy of the report, but a confidential minute of the trip by Tydeman establishes his broad conclusions, and represents a significant archive in the annals of LINK. It states:-

“It seems to me that, in order to achieve conservation in Scotland (*sic*), we need to strengthen the voluntary sector. One way to achieve this would be to promote and formalise the Round Table to be more like the existing Wildlife and Countryside Links. There are potential complications in that some bodies like WWF and RSPB are national, and there would be some confusion and contradiction without care. Nonetheless, such an organisation would be invaluable to WWF in its initial stages of a conservation presence, and would provide a focal point from which to negotiate with the Scottish Office.”

The London group discussed this idea at the meeting with the Round Table, and the response was generally favourable. Tydeman’s minute continues:-

“I offered grant in principle, subject to all the usual caveats, and am liaising with David Minns and Drennan Watson. I have also offered to negotiate with NCC on behalf of the new grouping, whose name has yet to be decided. Most of the groups present were adamant that they would not accept any funds from the Countryside Commission for Scotland (CCS). The organisation is not held in quite the esteem that the Countryside Commission for England and Wales is by Countryside Link. It appears to be treated as an offshoot of the Scottish Office, and there is room here for some effort by voluntary bodies.”

It would be wrong to suggest that this WL/WWF initiative led directly to the establishment of LINK. The Round Table was already considering a gradual evolution in this direction. But the offer of funding made it possible to accelerate the process and, perhaps more importantly, it ensured that the creation of the new organisation was a high priority on Simon Pepper’s work plan, allowing him to dedicate some of his creative energy to assisting this process.

1.2: LINK emerges

So it was that a working group was set up, under the auspices of the Round Table, to consider the establishment of a new Scotland-wide organisation. From June 1986, a series of meetings were held in Perth to develop the constitution for the new body. The records note that the private meeting room where they met cost £6.75 to hire, and all attending were invited to donate towards the cost!

Unlike in England, all involved were convinced that the new Scottish body should embrace both wildlife and countryside. Wildlife Link in London also included animal welfare bodies, but it was felt that this could lead to confusion and potential conflicts of interest in Scotland, so the constitution was designed appropriately. It stated that membership was open to voluntary organisations whose aims include the conservation of landscape, wildlife or amenity in Scotland (this effectively ruled out purely animal welfare bodies), and which have a substantial interest in Scotland

(effectively excluding London-based bodies which had not invested in a significant presence in Scotland).

The aims of LINK were identified as:-

- maintaining closer contact between relevant organisations
- improving communication between the voluntary sector and government bodies / the media
- gaining a higher profile for conservation in Scotland.

Despite this broad remit, the origins in the partnership that fought the ill-advised Lurcher's proposals is perpetuated to this day in the fact that the only truly local groups represented on LINK are ones with a strong locus around the Cairngorms massif.

The meetings to discuss the constitution were long and intense, with endless negotiation over the finest points of detail, as Bob Aitken recollects. The minutes of the meeting in November 1986 note that the draft constitution was discussed "at length", and that "numerous alterations were discussed and agreed". The meeting, which also considered the role of the proposed Link secretary and the offer of funding from WWF, began at 7pm but didn't finish until exhaustion (and probably thirst) set in at 10.30.

The move from a discussion forum to an incorporated organisation did not please everyone. Simon Pepper's personal notes from the period note, for example, that John Baldwin, Chief Executive of the SWT, was very suspicious of the proposal, did not attend any of the Round Table meetings and sent junior staff along purely to take notes. He had been instructed to "go slow" on these matters by his chairman, George Stewart, who was very much part of the 'countryside establishment' of the day. Stewart had worked with the Forestry Commission from 1949 until 1979, served as a Commissioner on the CCS from 1981 to 1988 and was also advisor to the Highlands & Islands Development Board on its Cairngorms Estate. He accepted the role of the Round Table in sharing news and exchanging ideas, but, according to Pepper's contemporary notes, was "scared stiff of co-ordination" and feared the prospect of the SWT being "dragged along by activists like Roger Smith (of the SWLG)". Pepper recalls that Stewart regarded Wildlife Link as "militant" and was "proud of the Scottish tradition of doing things more gently".

Pepper's key enabling role in the formation of LINK is clear later in his note, when he states:-

"After persuasion, [Stewart] accepted that LINK will happen anyway; it would therefore be best if SWT took it seriously and exerted its authority so as not to be 'dragged along'. [He] agreed to instruct J Baldwin to attend meetings and to present a paper to the SWT Council, who have not yet been consulted. I shall push."

Stewart was also a regional representative for the NTS, and was sure that organisation would not join LINK. In fact, its staff were enthusiastically involved as members of the Round Table, and the NTS joined LINK from the start, perhaps because its more conservative council and senior officers were never entirely aware of what was going on!

So, by November 1986, Pepper was able to note that that “progress was greater than I had appreciated” and the proto-network was “now almost ready for launch”. It had begun to address major issues, with discussions about the potential for the Cairngorms as a future World Heritage Site and on a proposed working party on ski developments. By January 1987, even before Link had been formally constituted, David Minns as acting chair was firing off letters to Michael Ancram, parliamentary under-secretary at the Scottish Office, and to the Department of the Environment about World Heritage status for the Cairngorms.

1.3: First Steps

So it was that Link hit the ground running at its first constituted meeting in February 1987. The meeting agreed the role for a Link secretary, and identified the start-up costs, with £2,500 of capital expenses, £13,500 of annual running costs, £500 to advertise for and appoint the secretary, and £2,000 as a contribution towards travelling expenses for smaller member organisations. It was agreed formally to approach WWF (encouraged by the provisional offer from Chris Tydeman) and the Special Grants (Environmental) Programme scheme run by the Scottish Development Department (SDD) for 50% each of these running costs (the SDD later agreed funding of £7,500 for that first year, somewhat less than LINK had sought). The possibility was also identified of approaching the Nature Conservancy Council or Countryside Commission for Scotland for grants towards specific projects.

That meeting also moved on to specific conservation issues: responding to the Highland Regional Council working party report on skiing, and plans for a one-day conference on the Cairngorms, while Xanthe Jay raised concerns about a consultation paper of Landscape Conservation Orders, which seemed to be geared to National Parks in England, but on which the SDD was also consulting. So two key Link themes were already emerging: the Cairngorms (inevitably given the genesis of Link and some of the founding bodies), and National Parks.

There was a second meeting in March, followed by the first AGM on 5th May 1987, at which Drennan Watson was unanimously elected chair, with David Minns taking on the role of vice-chair and Simon Pepper and Bob Aitken agreeing to serve on the management committee. Watson recalls that Minns would have made an excellent chair, but his employers in the RSPB were not prepared to release enough of his time to take on this role. Minns also recollects: “I gave a donation of £1 towards room hire – isn’t that sweet!”.

Several new organisations had applied for membership, and each was checked against the contribution they could make to the roles identified in the constitution. Skiing and conservation issues remained high on the agenda, but new themes were also emerging. A fishfarming working party had been set up, with its first meeting in April agreeing to Simon Pepper as its chair. Further working parties (as they were then called) were proposed on forestry, and, inevitably, on the Cairngorms. And already the benefits of joint working were evident: Link had been approached to provide a speaker for a 15-minute presentation on nature conservation in Scotland at the House of Lords in July (it was agreed that David Minns would accept this role).

In September 1987, according to Minns' records, Link had its first formal meeting with a Minister – Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, who was Under-secretary of State for Scotland from 1987 to 1995, covering the environment brief for most of that time. However, there is no record of this meeting in the LINK files. As Simon Pepper recalls, conservation issues were handled at the time by a small team of about four people in the Scottish *Development* Department – an ironic juxtaposition that shows just how far behind environmental thinking was in the Scottish Office of the day.

The following month, records show that a meeting was held with the Countryside Commission for Scotland (CCS), although minutes report that this meeting was “disappointing and no real progress had been made”. The following month, the first of a regular system of 6-monthly meetings was held with Scottish officials of the Nature Conservancy Council in Edinburgh (although attendees recall these as stiffly formal and guarded). That first meeting largely explored potential relationships between LINK and the NCC, but the minutes betray NCC's sensitivities about liaison between LINK and NCC staff members “because of the differences between an individual's professional and personal roles” and because “NCC staff may only speak as scientists; they are not trained to express views of a political nature (no matter how shrewd they may be)”.

Meetings were subsequently instigated with the Scottish Crofters' Union. Forestry Commission meetings were then held at the UK level, under the joint auspices of Wildlife Link and Countryside Link, and Scottish LINK joined in with these from July 1988, usually with Drennan Watson chairing.

Simon Pepper recalls the “profoundly reassuring feeling of actually collaborating” as Link began its work. “We were feeling frail against the forces of darkness”, he recalls, but Link pointed a way forward. David Minns is clear what he wanted from LINK. He was “fed up being on the front line all the time” He didn't expect LINK to shout and scream, but he did want “a nice big, solid body behind me, marching into the Minister's office and having a meeting”. He wanted LINK to open doors and get issues on the agenda, but he was clear that “we still needed the storm-troopers in Friends of the Earth Scotland (FoES) and Greenpeace”.

Both Pepper and Minns had a vision for LINK, but both admit to profound relief that LINK has survived and grown to the influential body it is in 2007.

Pat Wells of the BSCG recalls that it was “terrific to be working with like-minded people”. The support, expertise and experience available within LINK was invaluable for small groups like hers, together with the confidence that they were not fighting their battles alone. She says she was seen as “a bit of a radical” by the professionals from some of the larger organisations, who were inclined towards a more measured approach, but she reckons everyone benefited: BSCG valued the tactical skills of the more experienced organisations, while her local insights, in turn, helped encourage them to be more ambitious for the environment.

The formal press launch of LINK was delayed until February 1988, timed to be a month before the launch of a report on marine fishfarming. A quote in the press release by Drennan Watson gives a clear perspective on these early days:

“Environmental problems are arising in Scotland at an accelerating rate, and are of increasing technical complexity. It is becoming more difficult for any single voluntary organisation to understand and act on all these issues. If we are to prevent these problems steadily degrading the unique environment of Scotland and the quality of life of its people, environmental groups in Scotland need to co-ordinate their efforts and increase their effectiveness. We hope the formation of Scottish Link will be a major step towards achieving this.”

At the April 1988 meeting, members reviewed progress over the first year, and, according to the minutes, “agreed that, given the constraints imposed by limited resources, progress had been good (in terms of working groups and meetings), although the making of joint responses was felt to need further attention” – an issue that continued to be vexatious for many years, until sufficient trust was developed for members not to pick over every detail of wording.

LINK then was still finding its way, and there was a heated discussion at the meeting on whether LINK should aspire to lobbying. It is also worth noting that of 15 member organisations represented at that meeting, only 6 were represented by paid employees, reflecting the financially fragile state of the environmental movement in Scotland in 1988.

In March 1988, a LINK delegation had its first formal meeting in the Scottish Office with Eileen Mackay, head of the Scottish Development Department’s Rural Environment and Nature Conservation Division (RENC). By that time, RENC had a staff of 16 and was responsible for a budget of £5½ million, most of which went to the CCS. The meeting was largely to introduce the roles of each organisation, but LINK raised concerns about the process of appointing committee members for CCS and the NCC Scottish Committee, and the lack of action by the Scottish Office in pursuing World Heritage Site status for the Cairngorms.

When they met again with RENC eight months later, Roger Crofts (later to become Chief Executive of Scottish Natural Heritage) had replaced Eileen Mackay at Assistant Secretary level, and the RENC team also included Bill Howat, responsible for UK2000, nature conservation issues and the Environmental Grants Scheme. In

his introduction, Crofts expressed pleasure at the development of LINK, and the minutes noted that “he believed SWCL’s positive approach would cause the development ‘group’ to have to meet the conservation lobby in the middle ground, thus preventing entrenchment of attitudes.”

Lloyd Austin remembers Bill Howat as “an early example of a new breed of civil servant who treated stakeholders as people to have sensible conversations with”. Howat admits that might be why he didn’t last long as a civil servant (he moved on to work for Comhairle nan Eilein Siar), but he says his instinct was around consensus and trying to understand all sides of an argument. When he first met with the environmental NGOs, he says, everyone was in their corners shouting. By the end of his three years in the Scottish Office, LINK members had learned how to negotiate, and were getting round the table for really mature discussions.

The following year’s Annual Report records how this relationship was developing:

“SWCL’s relations with [RENC] have shown very encouraging progress in the past year, with opportunities for briefing and discussion on a number of different topics. A formal liaison meeting with the division took place on 29 November 1988, and RENC officials have also attended some SWCL working group meetings and one of the Association’s quarterly general meetings.”

In September 1988, delegates from LINK were invited to present their views on the new development proposal for Lurcher’s Gully to CCS Commissioners, as part of the CCS fact-finding exercise. All the parties were offered an hour to present their case, but Drennan Watson decided the commissioners would be bored stiff by the time they got to him. So he decided to restrict his presentation to just 15 minutes, then invite questions and discussion. He felt it was so important to get his short presentation right that he worked on it throughout the night before, and needed several strong coffees to complete his drive from Alford to Battleby the next morning. He says the best tactic in outmanoeuvring opponents eight times your size is “to move them onto a completely different battleground where they don’t expect to fight”. Afterwards, the CCS chairman described the case presented by LINK as “formidable”.

By January 1989, another issue had arrived on LINK’s agenda, with a proposal that LINK might host a public conference on National Parks for Scotland, although it was agreed that members first needed to develop a common line of thought on this topic through an internal seminar. Later that year, the proposal emerged to split the NCC and establish a separate natural heritage agency for Scotland, and this inspired a great deal of debate and a step-change in LINK’s engagement on political issues.

By 1990, LINK’s first staff member has been in post for three years, a treasurer and book-keeper had just been appointed, and further staff support was being sought. It therefore seemed an appropriate time to review LINK’s effectiveness, especially as the SDD was demanding some indication of LINK’s outputs before it could continue funding through its annual grant. A review was therefore commissioned by James

Fenton, published in March 1991. This concluded that members broadly felt that LINK was on the right track, and that it provided major support to their work. So the 1990-91 Annual Report was able to state:-

“...The last four years have established SWCL as a useful organisation for its members, and members have noted with some satisfaction SWCL’s rapid growth and development towards critical mass, which involves being able to deal effectively with crises, having a sufficient range of expertise to deal with most eventualities, and being in a position to set the agenda rather than respond to it.”

LINK had arrived!

1.4: LINK at twenty

Back in 1987-88, LINK has an operating expenditure of just £11,700. Eighteen years later, its expenditure in 2005-06 exceeded £200,000, and its operational surplus for that year was greater than its total income in its first year! That increase in income allows LINK to do a lot more, but, in reality, such a scale of income is only possible because LINK *is* doing a so much more. And it is still minimal for the ever-increasing expectations that are placed on LINK.

In the 2006-07 financial year, for example, LINK met with Scottish Ministers at least 6 times. It has presented evidence to the Communities Committee and the Environment and Rural Development Committees of the Scottish Parliament. It ran a very successful Environment Week from 5th - 11th February 2007. It launched a major **everyone** campaign in the run-up to the Scottish elections, based around four broad-brush themes supported by all the membership, and published an “**everyone’s** watching” end-of-term report on the environmental performance of the Scottish Parliament and Ministers in March 2007.

Twelve task forces (and a range of other groupings) were developing LINK’s work, and LINK was represented on a range of a wide range of major national stakeholder groups, convened by the Scottish Executive or its agencies, as shown in the table below.

| Stakeholder Groups with LINK engagement, 2006-07 |
|--|
| Scottish Rural Development Programme Stakeholder Group |
| – Land Management Contract (LMC) Stakeholder Group |
| – Natural Resources Subgroup of LMC Group |
| – Countryside Issues Subgroup of LMC Group |
| Less Favoured Areas Stewardship Scheme Stakeholder Group |
| SFP Implementation Advisory Group |
| Organic Stakeholder Group |
| ASIG Climate Change and Agriculture Subgroup |

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| Nitrates Working Group |
| LEADER Stakeholder Group |
| Scottish Landscape Forum |
| Advisory Group on the Marine and Coastal Strategy (AGMACS) |
| – Marine Nature Conservation workstream of AGMACS |
| Scottish Biodiversity Committee / Scottish Biodiversity Forum (SBF) |
| – SBF Rural Working Group |
| – SBF Marine Biodiversity Working Group |
| – SBF Urban Working Group |
| Sea Fisheries Advisory and Reference Group |
| Sea Fish Authority Sustainable Fisheries Advisory Group |
| Scottish Inshore Fisheries Advisory Group |
| Ministerial Working Group on Aquaculture (MWGA) |
| – Location, Relocation Working Group of MWGA |
| – Scottish Aquaculture Research Forum |
| Strategic Environmental Assessment Group for Sea Area 7 |
| Scottish Coastal Forum |
| Scottish Bathing Waters Review Panel |
| Coastal & Marine National Park Stakeholders Group |
| Scottish Liaison Group on Waste |
| Scottish Forestry Grants Scheme Applicants Group |
| National Forestry Forum |
| Deer Commission for Scotland Future Strategy Advisory Group |

As President, Fred Edwards has a clear perspective on this. Thanks to the “hard work and integrity of the pioneers”, he says, LINK has “slowly evolved from being a simple lobbying organisation to being a key stakeholder and consultee of the State”. He continues: “There are things now that Ministers wouldn’t dream of doing without consulting LINK. Of course they’re not committed to doing what they hear from LINK, nor should they, but they recognise that they would be failing the system if they didn’t at least *listen* to what LINK has to say”. He notes that the balance of political influence is shifting, so that sometimes Ministers now lobby the CBI, rather than *vice versa*, and he believes they may soon do the same with LINK!

Tim Birley, who now works with the Sustainable Development Commission but formerly dealt with LINK in the Scottish Office, regularly sees one sign of this ‘mainstreaming’ of the LINK agenda when group heads in the Scottish Executive boast how many people from the NGOs are now seconded in their departments.

So what allowed LINK to make such major progress in its influence and effectiveness over its first twenty years? That is the focus for the rest of this report.

2: MILESTONES AND STEP-CHANGES

2.01: The Way We Were

The re-establishment of the Scottish Parliament in May 1999 was the most momentous external change in LINK's first twenty years. Already it is becoming difficult to remember the frustrations for LINK of life BP (before the parliament), and so it is worth reflecting back on those days in this report – because to know where you are going, it is important first to know where you have come from.

The 1980s were a difficult time for the conservation movement in Scotland. The decade began encouragingly with the Wildlife & Countryside Act 1981, but Scotland was facing many environmental controversies. As well as the Longhaven Quarry and Northern Corries development proposals already mentioned, LINK stalwarts from these early days remember (amongst other *cause celebre*):-

- the boom in North Sea oil developments;
- recognition of the impact of 'acid rain', and attempts to alleviate it;
- the first attempts at Regional Structure Plans and Oil Contingency Plans, leading to controversy and several demanding 'examinations in public'
- the so-called 'Integrated Development Plan' for the Western Isles (memorably dubbed the 'Imminent Destruction Plan' in the RSPB's *Birds* magazine, and known as 'I Don't Pay' by the crofters on Lewis!);
- large-scale clear-felling in Abernethy Forest by Seafield Estate in 1981, without any form of public consultation;
- proposals to store nuclear waste in the Ayrshire hills;
- the growth of forestry, especially in sensitive areas like the Flow Country of Caithness & Sutherland, fuelled by a system that allowed costs for planting and maintaining commercial woodlands to count as a deduction against income and corporation tax;
- plans to develop Duich Moss on Islay to support the local distilleries;
- the development of fishfarming on the north and west coasts;

On the political front, elections in 1983 and 1987 had seen the Conservative party re-elected, but with the number of Tory MPs in Scotland in "freefall", according to Lloyd Austin, meaning that responsibility for the environment, forestry and agriculture in the Scottish Office was typically handed either to a "tame Lord" or at least to someone with strong family landowning interests. This was also the period, Austin points out, when "all the LINK grey beards cut their teeth".

Simon Pepper recalls that the early days of LINK were "pretty gruelling, tearing lumps out of the Scottish Office, Forestry Commission, NCC etc", and emphasises just how "thinly populated" the environmental NGOs were in these days, with only

three or four LINK member bodies having paid policy officers. He recalls that “engagements with Ministers were hostile”.

LINK struggled even to get meetings Scottish MPs and Ministers, who spent most of their time with Westminster. In 1989, for example, LINK minutes record that “members were doubtful of the chances of arranging briefing sessions for politicians anywhere other than in London”. LINK could only meet with Scottish Office Ministers in Edinburgh on Mondays and Fridays; the rest of the week they were in London and meetings in Dover House were the only option. Meetings with Scottish MPs were even more difficult for LINK to arrange, although some of the canny campaigners occasionally arranged to meet up with MPs when they were briefly trapped in the departure lounge of Edinburgh or Glasgow airports on their way south to Westminster on Mondays.

In January 1989, LINK issued a press release calling on Lord James Douglas-Hamilton, the Minister of Home Affairs and Environment (and an elected MP), to meet with them urgently “to explain the government’s policies for the reconciliation of conservation and development”, and arguing that the system adopted by the government “led to unnecessary suspicion and acrimony, which the government apparently did nothing to reduce”.

A meeting was duly arranged for 20th March in New St Andrews House. On the agenda were issues relating to the balance between conservation and development, including *Our Common Future*, the UK government response in 1988 to the Brundtland report, and a speech made by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher to the Royal Society the previous September. Afterwards, Drennan Watson wrote to the Minister to thank him “for the courtesy with which you received us” and the “patience with which you listened to our views” – code, perhaps, for the fact that the Minister himself offered very little!

Lord James was universally regarded as a “nice chap”, but meetings with him were not famously productive. Agenda items had to be notified to the Scottish Office well in advance, and officials then prepared briefings for Lord James. Sometimes, though, Lord James was known to turn to the wrong page of his briefing and gave an answer to a completely different question to the one he was asked! Drennan Watson recalls one occasion when, after a protracted discussion on the details of some issue or other, Lord James politely said “these chaps know much more about this than me, so I’ll just pour the tea”.

In the absence of any democratic mandate in Scotland, and the frequent absence of Ministerial clout, a small cabal of heads of department in the Scottish Office were running the country. Access to Ministers was usually possible only after a preliminary meeting with these officials, and only if they were then willing to brief Ministers to accept LINK’s request for a meeting. Otherwise, LINK’s requests for meetings were simply, and frequently, rejected.

Secretaries of State generally were rather more astute politically, but LINK was rarely able to meet with them. Later in 1989, LINK had grave concerns about the

proposal to split the NCC into separate bodies for England, Scotland and Wales, then to merge the Scottish NCC with the CCS. In a press release, it stated:-

“As they stand, the government’s proposals offer scant justification for any such move, which threatens a serious weakening of conservation in Scotland. The Scottish Office’s record of ignoring the advice of the NCC gives little hope that Scotland’s priceless wildlife and countryside heritage will be in safe hands, especially if the new combined quango has reduced staff and status.”

LINK called for a meeting with Ministers to discuss the Plan, and they were again offered a meeting with Lord James. They refused this offer, arguing that this was a political decision taken at a much higher level, and insisting instead that they should meet with the Secretary of State. Their gambit paid off, and they duly met with Malcolm Rifkind on 15th December 1989.

Although LINK felt it was taking a big gamble in insisting on a meeting with the Secretary of State, one of his officials at the time says they were pushing at an open door. Rifkind had quickly worked out just how many potential voters the LINK member bodies represented (long before LINK had begun to use this figure to support its own case), and instructed his officials to make the meeting happen.

The minutes record that Rifkind “had believed for some time that there were powerful arguments for a single Scottish Natural Heritage Agency (NHA), and opinion from both the existing Scottish agencies had supported this view”. Rifkind also argued that nature conservation had been much more controversial in Scotland than elsewhere in the UK, and believed that a Scottish NHA would be more likely to command public respect and support. According to the minutes, “he appreciated that this must be based on certain principles, such as independence of the new body, adequate resources, a separate research base and appointments (by the Scottish Office) of people with a recognised commitment to conservation”.

The minutes note that Simon Pepper responded that it had been relatively easy for the Scottish Office to ignore the advice of Countryside Commission for Scotland (which the Scottish Office wholly funded) in the past. The minutes note that Rifkind “responded crossly that increased funding had recently been allocated to CCS” – ministerial crossness was not unusual at LINK meetings in those days! Xanthe Jay argued that the Scottish Advisory Committee of NCC was heavily weighted with landowners, thus constraining and compromising the conservation cause when it needed strengthened. The whole problem required proper analysis before a solution was provided, she suggested.

Crossness was also the theme when LINK met with Lord Sanderson (who had overall responsibility for rural affairs in the Scottish Office) in July 1990 to discuss forestry issues. Simon Pepper recalls that Lord Sanderson began the meeting by bursting into the room and throwing down a copy of *The Scotsman*. The minutes of the meeting record further:-

“Lord Sanderson referred to an article in that day’s *Scotsman* on the issue of the Environment White Paper, and refuted reported statements by David Minns within this, which suggested that the Scottish Office was taking scant part. He insisted that the SO had been, and would continue to be involved, and asked that the message be relayed to David Minns”.

Recollecting that meeting, Drennan Watson remembers the Minister saying: “Who do you represent? You must know that we have many members of the Conservative Party in Scotland that I represent (quoting a figure).” “My goodness, Minister”, said the RSPB representative, “we enrolled more new members than that last month!”. “Game, set and match”, Watson comments, while Simon Pepper remembers the delicious irony of an unelected representative from the House of Lords from a minority political party in Scotland asking LINK who *they* represented!

The minutes of the meeting note that the LINK delegation supported a UK-level call for the government to adopt a capability to conduct environmental audit on its policies and undertakings via a relatively independent agency (Strategic Environmental Assessment did not become a statutory requirement until 2006). They went on: “Alison Ross reported the voluntary bodies’ extreme concern regarding the lack of an overall policy for the integration, sustainable use, and protection of Scotland’s marine resources” – an issue on which LINK is still awaiting a satisfactory outcome 17 years later! The meeting also queried the role of the Crown Estate Commission – another issue back on the agenda in 2007, but this time thanks to work by a local authority (the Highland Council), not an non-governmental organisation (NGO).

The continuing frustration with these meetings is evident in the minutes of a meeting with Lord James Douglas-Hamilton in March 1991 to discuss issues relating to the Green Agenda, agriculture and forestry. At end “Drennan Watson noted that ministerial contact with the Scottish environmental NGOs had not been close in the past, and proposed that a schedule of regular meetings should now be agreed, given the range of issues on the agenda and speed at which changes were now happening. Lord James agreed that more regular meetings would be valuable, as and when there were issues of importance to discuss.”

However, 18 months later, the new environment minister, Sir Hector Monro, still turned down a request for a meeting with LINK. His officials replied that the Minister “wishes to ensure that his meetings with bodies such as LINK are effective by giving them a clear focus, and, if appropriate, a definite outcome; in order to achieve this, he would prefer that you first explore with his officials the issues you wish to discuss with him”. A meeting with officials was duly held in November 1982.

LINK had also noted the importance of establishing a relationship with the main opposition party, and in July 1991 it arranged a meeting with Donald Dewar, the Shadow Scottish Secretary, although Drennan Watson later “expressed concern that more advance preparation for this meeting had not been possible”. The meeting was also attended by Sam Galbraith and Brian Wilson, and a young research officer

called Wendy Alexander. It is interesting now to note that national parks, environmental education, the control of red deer, sustainable land use, and support for voluntary bodies were all discussed. On national parks, Dewar accepted the strategic need in the Loch Lomond area but was less enthusiastic for other parts of Scotland, while he felt there was a strategic need for asserting the right to roam, which he believe was leading to no significant damage – both issues that would form a significant aspect of Labour’s manifesto in 1997. Unfortunately, time ran out without any discussion on the agenda item on protecting the marine environment.

Meantime, LINK was become more and more attuned in its tactics. Simon Pepper recalls with glee a meeting with the Forestry Commission (FC), attended also by colleagues from the other Link organisations in the UK. One of the delegation was a baroness from Wales, and at the pre-meeting it was agreed that she should begin by congratulating the FC on its environmentally sensitive policies in Wales. The FC officers were lured into the trap, and made self-congratulatory comments on their environmental credentials. Then the Links hit with the killer blow, asking why the FC were so seriously betraying these credentials in the Flow Country. FC Chairman Gwyn Francis and his colleagues were left lost for words, but Pepper says they did begin to rethink their policies as a result – and he adds that the transformation of the FC today is “just staggering”.

But the stark polarisation between LINK and the Scottish Office and its agencies in those (distant) days is perhaps illustrated most tellingly by an exchange in November 1988 with Robert Cowan, chairman of the Highlands & Islands Development Board. In a major speech, widely quoted in the press, Cowan said that conservation had become a dirty word in the Highlands and Islands, through lack of consideration for local aspirations and needs. The area’s people did not want, or need, to be told what development could or could not take place in their land by others, often many miles removed from the physical reality of the Highlands & Islands, he said. He went on:-

“This kind of attitude is seen as patronising, arrogant and selfish by many a Highlander and Islander. They have deep roots and long memories of exploitation. They will point out that the Highlands have been too long looked upon and used as a place for sheep, deer and for trees, to the exclusion and disadvantage of those who live there.”

While it is undoubtedly true that some of the LINK member bodies had not always been sensitive to community aspirations in their public statements, LINK’s response argued that “conservation is not about the narrow defence of specialist interests; it is about looking after the natural environment so it can continue to yield prosperity and give pleasure to future generations. Any public statements attempting to discredit it in a generalised way are highly irresponsible.”

Cowan’s response was simply to re-quote his speech verbatim in a letter to LINK, and he ended “so you see I was offering you good advice: perhaps you should take it” – an attitude that might seem unthinkable today, but which reflected the uncomfortable cultural chasm that then existed between development and conservation interests.

2.02: Hang together or hang separately

Looking back over the twenty years, since those challenging beginnings, everyone spoken to for this report recognises that LINK has one fundamental role: to ensure that the voluntary environment movement speaks with a concerted voice – or at least that, where different bodies choose to take different stances, they do so in ways that respect the views of their colleagues. Lloyd Austin, a past LINK chairman, likens this to how different trade unions come together at the TUC to hammer out a united stance on key issues. He says that “all LINK bodies recognise that they are on the progressive side of public debate and that the defenders of the *status quo* will pounce on, and exploit, any divisions”. It is important therefore for LINK to wash its dirty linen in private, as it has had to do in the past on potential divisive issues such as national parks and access legislation.

Austin adds that “even if member bodies choose to act individually, as they often do, their actions can be refined by talking to like-minded bodies”. He also emphasises that the most important purpose of LINK is the most mundane – the exchange of information and intelligence. “That is the cake”, he says, “and collective action is the icing.” Austin’s RSPB colleague Anne McCall shares this view, saying that the LINK benefit that is talked about least, but appreciated the most, is the structured opportunity it offers to work closely with colleagues who have parallel interests but different perspectives and ways of working.

Drennan Watson summarises these two roles as “pooling knowledge” and “collective clout”. It is a fundamental principle that, where the member bodies do act jointly through LINK – in making a statement or issuing a report, for example – then somewhere the document will list the range of member bodies that support its content. LINK therefore is a vehicle to express the collective views of its members on their behalf, rather than an organisation which itself develops a view. Sometimes individual member bodies cannot sign up to a LINK document because it goes beyond the constitutional remit of their own organisation – a landscape body would be unlikely to have a view on fishing practices, for example, and a marine organisation could not comment on Cairngorms policy.

Deborah Long of Plantlife Scotland (and Vice-chair of LINK) talks about the immense value of LINK to a small organisation such as hers. LINK offers huge support in terms of information and contacts in a Scottish context, and she says she is able to get much more done for Plantlife as a result. As an illustration, she referred to the work that Calum Duncan of the Marine Conservation Society did in drawing up a response to the 2006 consultation on a proposed Marine and Coastal National Park. Plantlife was happy to sign up to this joint response, thus allowing it to represent the interests of marine plants and algae with the minimum time commitment by Long herself. She also says she meets regularly with Ministers through the LINK Task Forces, an opportunity that would be unlikely to come to a small organisation like Plantlife independently.

At the opposite end of the membership scale, Anne McCall reckons that the RSPB also gets good value from LINK. As a bird organisation, it would struggle for acceptance as a sound voice on energy policy, for example, but, by working together with FoES, WWF and the Ramblers, it is able to contribute to the energy debate and to be taken seriously. She welcomes the reassurance that LINK colleagues offer when she gets to the edge of her ‘comfort zone’ on policy issues. Jen Anderson welcomes this recognition of the value LINK offers its member bodies, but she emphasises that the LINK Board needs to keep selling these benefits to member bodies, whenever they quibble about subscriptions and demands on their staff time.

Robin Pellew, former Chief Executive of the NTS, points out another benefit of joint campaigning with LINK partners: “For an organisation like the NTS, active political campaigning in the name of the NTS is still not acceptable to much of the membership – it is deemed too radical. It is much easier to throw the NTS’s weight behind the campaigning work of LINK, even if this includes themes on which the NTS has no declared position.” The NTS was undoubtedly not alone in this situation, with staff somewhat ahead in their thinking of their organisation’s Board and membership.

In taking forward its work, Fred Edwards says it has been vital for LINK to avoid becoming a competitor with its constituent bodies for funding or support, although he recognises there is inevitable competition for column inches in the media. He describes LINK as “much more an ecology, a collectedness of niches”. Simon Pepper agrees that LINK works best when it is seen as a vehicle – Drennan Watson’s bus analogy – rather than a force with views in its own right. That is one reason why LINK has always stepped back from appointing a Director (despite the stated preference of some of its funders), because that would begin to imply a separate existence for LINK that could become threatening to member bodies.

Edwards notes that LINK has been supported in the past by the huge commitment of a range of individuals from member bodies, who have been able to stand back from their role with that body to become a champion of LINK. But he says that could be changing. Whereas working for the environment movement until recently was largely vocational, as the movement progresses, and LINK member bodies become larger and more business-orientated, Edwards recognises that careerism will become more important. That might change internal relationships within LINK. However, the role of an independent President – particularly one as committed and enthusiastic as Edwards – helps to ensure a broader perspective, and, as Lloyd Austin points out, the Link Board members are appointed as individuals and trustees of LINK, not to represent the bodies they work for.

Drennan Watson recognises the growing professionalism within the environmental movement, but expresses concern that training today concentrates on environmental science, not environmental management; he is concerned about the resulting loss of skills, and the reality checks that go with it. He worries that a certain homogeneity is emerging amongst NGO staff, who could easily interchange between member bodies (and frequently do), and he wonders, for example, why there are no economists in LINK to bring in a different perspective.

Pat Wells is keen to emphasise the vital role of the small member bodies, whose representatives bring a little more reality to the proceedings, through their detailed knowledge and understanding of events and perceptions at the local level. She recognises the tactical importance of the environmental NGOs being as unified as possible in their approaches. Referring to the current controversy on “wind factories” in the Highlands, she points out that developers time and again have used the argument that “even the conservationists can’t agree” to help push through their development proposals.

On the other hand, the engagement of smaller bodies in LINK’s work puts huge pressures on their representatives. As a Task Force convenor, Anne McCall worries that some of the smaller organisations are spread very thinly, yet trying to do a huge amount. Just occasionally, she says, this results in them turning up unprepared at representative meetings, and this can undermine the communal approach of LINK as it seeks to ensure professionalism and consistency in its work. Dan Barlow welcomes the role of small member bodies but suggests they should opt into the LINK process where they stand to get the most value, and should remember that they can dip out of Task Forces when work overload demands it.

The former ministerial advisers spoken in compiling this report also emphasised how important the breadth of representation within LINK was to them and to Ministers. It is not difficult for Ministers to meet regularly with the larger NGOs (as Ross Finnie has sought to do in recent years), but meeting with LINK also gives them access to a much wider range of smaller bodies, representing a diverse range of constituencies (in every senses). Ministers value that breadth of representation, which LINK should therefore continue to nurture.

Dave Morris of the Ramblers says that, in principle, LINK is an outstanding success in offering one-door access for the government and its agencies to meet with the voluntary sector. The downside, he says, is that the government often gives a single place to LINK on consultative groups, when separately the different interest groups on LINK might well have won several places. And he worries that “a wide collective voice can become dangerously sluggish”.

2.03: Leadership (and the Bosnian crisis)

Lloyd Austin recalls that, when David Minns first introduced him to LINK back in 1990, he commented that “if you can keep this lot together, you’ll be able to solve the Bosnian crisis”. Perhaps, then, the greatest success is that “this lot” is still together in 2007 (there have been some comings and goings of members, but the core of membership has remained throughout the period). Part of the credit for that success must lie with the individuals who have led the organisation over its 20-year history, each bringing different skills and different perspectives.

Undoubtedly, the most formative leadership was provided by LINK’s founder chairman, Drennan Watson. He was unpaid for this work, although he later received

a small honorarium from WWF. After Simon Pepper attended a LINK working group meeting in November 1986, he wrote:-

“This meeting reinforced my view that the future of LINK in Scotland will depend on powerful chairmanship, exercising authority not only within LINK, to impose balance and retain the faith of the more middle-of-the-road organisations, but also outside, to represent LINK in a responsible and politically accurate manner, so as to build up credibility.”

There is wide agreement that nobody could have fulfilled this role better than Watson. Until 1986, he had been an outreach officer with the Northern College of Agriculture, in what was essentially an enabling role. He later became a founding director of Highlands & Islands Forum, which aimed to help local communities become more involved with managing and benefiting from their local natural resources – again an enabling role. So he was clear from the start, he says, that LINK “should be an enabling organisation, not a campaigning one that competed with its members”. He would later tell LINK staff: “always think of things to do for the members; don’t spend time thinking of things for the members to do”.

He saw that one of the key functions of LINK “was to create an alliance of organisations that, collectively, had such a following that they could not be ignored and could kick down the doors of the Scottish Office and get direct to Ministers – which they did”. His role, therefore, was “to facilitate joint action, while ensuring that each member kept its identity”. That, he said, required a subtle kind of leadership at LINK meetings.

Watson says it was important that he came from one of the smaller LINK bodies, and so did not represent a threat to the larger ones. While ostensibly being an impartial chair at meetings, he saw his job as providing strong leadership when it was required, drawing on his Dutch training as a facilitator – and anyone who attended LINK in those days recalls how meetings would suddenly veer off in unexpected and productive directions that challenged everyone’s preconceptions, without it ever being evident that Watson had provided that subtle steer!

Watson recognised that meetings needed to be businesslike, but also congenial and relaxed so that people could develop relationships with one another – one of his favourite ‘party tricks’ was to offer David Minns a piece of liquorice whenever he voted ‘correctly’ at meetings! He says that LINK Chairs need to be articulate, committed and have broad knowledge.

As LINK grew in influence and began to achieve meetings with Ministers, Watson was sometimes criticised for campaigning, but he had a well-practiced reply: “Not at all. I run a bus! Today the bus destination board says ‘Scottish Office’, tomorrow it might say ‘Forestry Commission’. With it, I bring passengers and messages. All aboard! Ding, ding!”

Roger Crofts recalls that these meetings were especially appreciated in the Scottish Office, where he then worked. Watson would lead discussions in interesting

ways, and talk (polite) language that Ministers hadn't expected, but he kept to core issues that allowed the civil servants to adequately brief their Minister.

Watson set a difficult standard for others to follow, and at the end of his term, no obvious candidate was available to replace him. He was proposed as an Honorary President, but says now that he was reluctant to stay involved: "I had learned that when you give up a post like that, especially if you are the founding chairman, there are two things you owe the organisation and your successors – your absence and your silence".

Instead, it was agreed to seek a figurehead Chair, with responsibilities for the direct management of the organisation passing to the chair of the Management Team. It was agreed that the Chair should "perform an ambassadorial role, act as a 'door-opener' to Ministers and to dealings with government, chair the AGM and important functions, and be able to lead the organisation and cultivate contact with other organisations". A subgroup short-listed seven potential candidates, but the clear preference identified by members was for Professor Seaton Baxter, Reader in the Faculty of Design at the Robert Gordon University and Director of the Centre for Environmental Studies in Aberdeen. He was duly co-opted as LINK's first 'external' Chairman in January 1994, and was confirmed in post at the AGM that June. Michael Scott from Plantlife Scotland became vice-chair and chair of the Management Team.

After his appointment, Baxter was immediately invited, with some other senior officers of LINK member bodies, to an informal lunch with Sir Hector Monro, and he had meetings with Roger Crofts at SNH and Robin Cutler at the Forestry Commission. However it quickly became clear that, although his role was foreseen as primarily ambassadorial, the title of Chair raised expectations that he would have a comprehensive understanding of LINK's position on all the main issues of the day, something that had never been envisaged by LINK. His position was further complicated by his appointment onto the Main Board of SNH in March 1995 and his subsequent appointment as chair of SNH's North-east Board that September.

Accordingly, the LINK AGM in July 1995 agreed that Baxter's task should be redefined as President, thus allowing him to continue his ambassadorial work while freeing him from the expectation of detailed knowledge on all LINK activities. Michael Scott then assumed the title of Chairman, while remaining essentially an internal manager of LINK's ongoing business.

Roger Crofts, who was chief executive of SNH in Baxter's time on the board, says he had an important role in lubricating LINK's relationship with SNH at Board level, despite the antagonism of SNH Chairman, Magnus Magnusson. The board liked Baxter as a "really genuine guy", even if they did not always understand what he was saying!

With his characteristic self-deprecating wit, Baxter reflects on the recent French elections and says his role with LINK was not so much Sarkozy as 'Tea-cosy', keeping the seat warm while other LINK activists brewed the tea! But in fact his role

as a ‘high-level ambassador’ was very influential and greatly aided by his appointment to SNH. More than anything else, it showed LINK’s gradual acceptance in the political mainstream.

After five years as Chair of the Management Team, Scott stood down in June 1998 after he, in turn, was appointed to the Board of SNH. No immediate successor was identified, so John Pringle of the Scottish Wild Land Group agreed to act as chair, but insisted on keeping the title of Vice-chair. Pringle oversaw important changes to the LINK constitution to meet new requirements on charities. He wrestled successfully with the Inland Revenue about arcane details of LINK’s charitable objects, and he refereed a major internal debate about how widely LINK should engage with the cultural heritage, eventually resolved, after much collective angst, by agreeing that LINK’s interest extended to “the environment and its *associated* cultural heritage”. The LINK staff are keen to emphasise just how important Pringle’s thoughtful leadership was in the critical year when LINK was without a designated chair.

Meanwhile, a sub-group was set up to identify a suitable Chairman, reverting once more to the external role. Simon Pepper notes that this constant redefining of the role of Chair and President reflects a sort of “inside/outside schizophrenia”, which is not always easy for external observers to understand. The table below therefore shows something of how these roles have changes over the years:-

| From | President | Chair | ‘Significant others’ | Post |
|---|---------------|------------------|---|-------------------------------------|
| Scottish Wildlife & Countryside Link | | | | |
| Feb 1987 | | David Minns | | |
| June 1987 | | Drennan Watson | David Minns | Vice-chair |
| June 1988 | | Drennan Watson | David Minns | Vice-chair |
| June 1989 | | Drennan Watson | David Minns | Vice-chair |
| June 1990 | | Drennan Watson | David Minns | Vice-chair |
| June 1991 | | Drennan Watson ‡ | David Minns | Vice-chair |
| June 1992 | | Vacant | David Minns then Alastair Lavery (from autumn 92) | Vice-chair |
| June 1993 | | Vacant † | David Minns | Chair, Management Team |
| June 1994 | | Seaton Baxter | Michael Scott | Vice-chair / Chair, Management Team |
| June 1995 | Seaton Baxter | Michael Scott | Penny Edwards | Vice-chair |
| June 1996 | Seaton Baxter | Michael Scott | Penny Edwards | Vice-chair |
| June 1997 | Seaton Baxter | Michael Scott | | |
| Scottish Environment Link | | | | |
| June 1998 | Seaton Baxter | Michael Scott | | |
| June 1999 | Seaton Baxter | Vacant | John Pringle | Vice-chair/Acting Chair |
| June 2000 | | Neil Rankin | Lloyd Austin | Vice-chair / Chair, Management Team |
| June 2001 | | Neil Rankin | Lloyd Austin | Vice-chair / Chair, |

| | | | | |
|-----------|--------------|---------------|---------------|--|
| | | | | Management Team |
| June 2002 | | Neil Rankin | Lloyd Austin | Vice-chair / Chair, Management Team |
| June 2003 | | Vacant | Lloyd Austin* | Chair of Board |
| June 2004 | Fred Edwards | Lloyd Austin* | John Mayhew | Vice-chair |
| June 2005 | Fred Edwards | Lloyd Austin* | John Mayhew | Vice-chair |
| June 2006 | Fred Edwards | John Mayhew* | Deborah Long | Vice-chair |
| June 2007 | ??? | | | |

‡ Drennan Watson ended his term as Chair on 11th Jun 1992

† Seaton Baxter was co-opted as Acting Chair in Jan 1994

* Chair of the LINK Board

In June 2000, on the recommendation of the subgroup, Rear Admiral Neil Rankin, chair of the board of directors of the Scottish Seabird Centre (by then a LINK member body), was elected Chair of LINK. Lloyd Austin of the RSPB took on the role of Management Team Chair and Seaton Baxter retired as President at the end of a six-year term.

Rankin was excellent in his ambassadorial role, highly supportive of LINK members and always keen to ensure fair play – he “helped captain the ship, at a time when things were going really well”, according to Jennifer Anderson. Jessica Pepper particularly appreciated his readiness to support the parliamentary team at party conferences, pressing the flesh with the gathered politicians and helping to cement LINK’s place as a significant player in the Scottish political process.

Lloyd Austin meanwhile provided invaluable continuity and leadership as chair of the Management Team. Few people have a sounder understanding of how LINK works, and Austin had to mediate on several potentially divisive issues on the LINK agenda to ensure that the network could continue to function effectively and in concert. His support and mentoring, advice and wisdom were hugely appreciated by the LINK staff, at a time when expectations and workloads were increasingly rapidly.

Neil Rankin stood down as LINK Chair after a three-year term in June 2003, and the post was again vacant for a year while his successor was sought. In the meantime, changes to the LINK constitution meant that Austin formally became chair of the LINK Board. LINK decided to revert to the external president / internal chair model, and in 2004 Fred Edwards was identified as candidate for President. He was duly elected in May, having already done considerable work with the **everyone** campaign for the European elections, with Lloyd Austin as Chairman (and John Mayhew, who also has a long association with LINK, has ably followed in Austin’s footsteps since 2006).

With a career in industry, the probation service and social work, Edward’s background with the voluntary sector spanned ecological, conservation, health and social justice issues, and he brought all this formidable experience to bear as President. As he approaches the end of his term in June 2007, everyone spoken to for

this report was unstinting in their praise for his dedication and inspirational support of LINK. John Mayhew commented: “He splendidly surpassed our expectations, took us onto a new plane of political and policy credibility, and made unprecedented contacts across Scottish society, as well as being one of the most admirable, charming and inspirational people I have ever met.” Deborah Long echoed that praise, commenting: “He is good at looking forward and seeing beyond the political manoeuvring to the wider perspectives, and good at highlighting the big issues about to hit us” – once more providing a hard act to follow as he ends his Presidency.

Edwards, in turn, is keen to praise the LINK people with whom he works. He talks about the “life-affirming process” of attending the planning meetings of Task Force convenors, and his “excitement to see these people falling over themselves to co-operate and think outside the box”. He sees his role as “helping with political guile”, and has championed LINK with Ministers as “an intelligence resource for the country”. He pays credit to the “generosity of spirit” of the larger LINK member bodies. He says their support has been critical, and notes that would not have happened had they perceived LINK as being a competitor in any way.

Simon Pepper points out that the table above shows “the staggering leadership commitment by RSPB over 20 years in the service of the movement”. The RSPB has provided a chair or vice-chair for fourteen out of LINK’s twenty years, it has always been represented on the Management Team or Board, and it has also provided convenors for several of the Working Groups and Task Forces. In one way it can afford to do so, as the largest and best-supported of all the LINK member bodies, but that equally means it could afford to do this work independently of LINK. Lloyd Austin and Anne McCall from the RSPB emphasise how much value they have had by working alongside partner bodies in LINK, but other interviewees were keen to acknowledge the great debt that LINK – and the environmental movement in general in Scotland – owes to the RSPB.

That debt extends today also to the National Trust for Scotland, who employ John Mayhew, the current chair of the LINK Board. It also extended to all the other bodies, large and small, and to line managers, who have allowed their staff time to contribute to the management of LINK, and to the individuals themselves, too numerous to list, who make a huge commitment that frequently extends well beyond normal office hours.

2.04: Safe hands

One of the most critical decisions in the early development of LINK was taken after interviews on 16th September 1987. 102 people had applied for the post of LINK Secretary, and interviews were held on that date. Eight days later, a written offer was posted to Jen Anderson. She began work on 15th October and had to deal with first general meeting of the organisation just 6 days later!

Drennan Watson claims that Anderson's appointment was "sheer luck", but points to the wise guidance that Pat Wells from the BSCG offered in the interview process. Wells recalls that the final choice was between two very competent candidates – Anderson and a smartly-dressed PR lady. The panel felt that either would do the administrative job very efficiently, but Anderson had more to offer since, according to Wells, "her heart was in it, because she loved the countryside".

Anderson says her only previous experience as an activist before joining LINK was helping a campaign to stop tree-planting in Glen Lednock in Perthshire. She felt that LINK was exciting and dynamic, and was impressed how the Management Team "had their fingers on the pulse". Initially she felt LINK had to be quite robust in its operating principles, until such time as people had built up mutual trust and respect (and her colleagues pay tribute to her central role in resolving many difficult issues during this process). Today, she thinks things can be much more relaxed. She also points to the huge effort that was needed to arrange meetings with Ministers, civil servants and agencies in those days; now email has made everything quicker, easier and much more informal.

Every LINK interviewee for this report pointed to the central role Anderson has played as the "bedrock" of LINK ever since. LINK President Fred Edwards describes her as "a true servant of the movement – hard-working, passionate, with a well-developed acquired knowledge, and so self-effacing that she is no threat to other egos in the movement", and chairman John Mayhew pays tribute to her "remarkable dedication, ability, consistency and persistence". Her quiet but assured character was ideal for the role, but the fact that she was female may also have helped, as David Minns emphasised: "A man as LINK Secretary would have had to fight all the big male egos in LINK; Jen did a wonderful job letting all the male egos bash into each other, and just quietly managed the process!".

Over twenty years, Anderson has grown with the job. In 1993, the post of co-ordinator was established to be more proactive than an essential passive secretariat; and she was offered the post as a development to her existing job. By 1999, her title had changed to Manager, then to Chief Officer in 2004. From January 1991 onwards, Anderson has been supported by Alice Walsh as Secretary, and the continuity and methodical management provided by these two 'partners-in-crime' has been an enormous asset to the stability and progression of LINK.

Over the years, a variety of other staff members have supported their work, both in the office in Perth, and as Parliamentary and project officers. They all showed a strong sense of 'ownership' of the organisation and a remarkable commitment to working with the particular demands that a network makes of itself and its staff – even if that can be deeply frustrating at times!

2.05: Tackling the Task

Right from the start, it was evident that it would be difficult to engage all member bodies in every aspect of LINK's work. Different groupings of member bodies had particular interests, and so the best way to concentrate their efforts was through what were initially called working parties, then working groups. Initial working groups looked at forestry, fishfarming and the Cairngorms. One on environmental education was added in 1991, and two more, on agriculture and freshwater, the following year.

Meanwhile, in 1988 the Cairngorms Working Group decided that it needed to take a much wider perspective when fighting development proposals such as the second proposal to develop Lurchers Gully in the Cairngorms for skiing. Inspired by Drennan Watson, Simon Pepper and Kenny Taylor of the SWT at one especially inspirational meeting near Kincaig, it decided to reconstitute itself as an independent Save the Cairngorms Campaign to fight for a more holistic approach to the management of the Cairngorms – a name-change that infuriated development interests but which more clearly reflected the group's concerns and more firmly established its engagement with the public (it later became the Cairngorms Campaign in 1996). Several interviewees pointed to LINK's flexibility in developing such models as one of its key strengths.

Typically, each working group had a spurt of highly productive activity, then fell a little into abeyance. In 1991, for example, the Forestry Working Group engaged in a series of intensive workshops, led by Donald McPhillimy, leading to the publication in March 1992 of *A Forest for Scotland*, a discussion paper on forestry policy, based on ecological, social and economic principles, which still reads well today and can be seen as a direct precursor to the Scottish Executive's own *Scottish Forestry Policy* fourteen years later. But after completing that major effort, the working group lost impetus as it sought inspiration for further work.

Recognising this cycle of activity and hiatus, LINK agreed that working groups should be replaced by time-limited Task Forces, aimed at achieving specific outcomes (although, in practice, some of these have reverted more towards the working group model in recent years). Importantly, all the task forces had to provide their own resourcing, without the heavy staff support on which the working groups had relied – in effect they became self-supporting topic networks within the wider LINK association. This arrangement also allowed some issues to be semi-detached from the mainstream of LINK's work. The intensive work required for the campaign against the Lingerabay superquarry, for example, was taken forward by a Quarry Working Group, as told in the 2006 LINK report *The Battle for Roineabhal*.

Throughout LINK's history, these Working Groups and Task Forces have been the well-spring of ideas, insight and inspiration and the powerhouse driving forward substantive pieces of work, despite (or probably because of) the diversity of experience that their members bring to the table – Fred Edwards describes them as “the jewel in LINK's crown” and promotes them as a significant source of intelligence for civic Scotland. Their work has been subtly marshalled and professionally organised by hard-working convenors, upon whom many LINK responsibilities are delegated. LINK – and all the partners who have benefited from LINK's work – owe a great debt to these convenors.

Another early innovation was the biannual Environment Conference, aimed at least as much as self-education as at influencing a wider policy agenda. The first of these in 1994, entitled *The Virtuous Circle*, looked at the ‘greening’ of rural development. It proved especially influential, bringing in the late Richard Sandbrook from the International Institute for Environment and Development to provide some international reflections on community development. His paper, covering ‘development paradigms’ and the ‘typology of participation’, still makes startling reading for environmentalists today, but Tim Birley (then at the Scottish Office) remembers his input as particularly useful, encouraging participants “to speak to strange audiences, not just to your own ‘bubble of awareness’”.

This was followed in 1997 by *People and the Environment: A Common Cause*, built around the thesis of *The Politics of the Real World*, whose author, Michael Jacobs spoke at the conference. In 1999, the topic was *The Environment in Politics*, hosted by Edinburgh Council and chaired by Ken Collins MEP, while the 2001 conference returned to Edinburgh with the theme *Making Links – Citizens and Sustainability*. The results of each conference were published. They helped to engage a wider audience in debates about future approaches to the environment in Scotland and they provides valuable insights for many LINK member bodies on how they should be widening their agendas to capitalise on the growing interest in the environment and sustainability. From November 2002, the conferences were subsumed as a day of topic debate within the annual Link Members Congress.

On top of these events, LINK and its Task Forces has mounted a remarkable series of seminars and meetings over the years, often five or six in a year, to develop thinking on topics of current interest and to future-scan for issues on which member bodies should be preparing to engage. These were often open to audiences beyond the LINK membership, and several interviewees referred to how valuable these were in informing their own ideas. Jen Anderson refers to these seminars as “mind-boggling”, and that was certainly the feeling that many participants had at the end of these events!

2.06: Reliability and Authority

One major tactic adopted by LINK almost from its inception was the production of reliable and authoritative reports. The first LINK report was on *Marine Fishfarming in Scotland*, produced by LINK's Fishfarming Working Group and launched in Glasgow in March 1988. Simon Pepper, who chaired the group, says it was a significant landmark. The group had gone out of its way to listen to all viewpoints in compiling its report, and had drawn together all sorts of disparate elements. When the report appeared, industry representatives pounced on it, ready to tear it to shreds, but could find no significant factual errors. Pepper remains pleased at just how influential the report proved to be. (Interestingly, one of its recommendations was that planning control for fishfarming should be brought under the democratic control of local authorities, an issue that is being addressed only now, nineteen years later).

The report led directly to the formation of a LINK fishfarming post in 1988, with Sean Meikle appointed to the role. He was succeeded by Rosalind Spencer, who spearheaded reports on *Shellfish Farming and the Environment in Scotland*, published in February 1992 and on *The Future of Sea Lice Control in Cultured Salmonids* the following month. Although these were probably somewhat less influential, they were still highly valued – and, again, the critics were unable to find significant fault with them, much as they would have liked to.

In July 1988, the Management Team discussed LINK reports, in the light of the first report. They agreed that the aims of such reports “should include enhancing LINK's long-term image and credibility, as well as informing/educating the broader membership of LINK and reaching specific targets” – objectives that remained true for the many reports which followed. These included reports on coastal zone management in 1993, on integrated catchment management in 1994, on the review of Scotland's local authorities in 1995, and many more. All were highly regarded and many were well ahead of their time – for example, LINK is still waiting for a mechanism to bring about Integrated Coastal Zone Management thirteen years after its report appeared.

Another pioneering project in 1991 also proved LINK's ability to pull off difficult challenges with considerable authority. It was the *State of the Scottish Environment 1991* report, commissioned by Tom Dargie and David Briggs. Published in February 1992, it provided a “broad brush assessment of the current state of selected environmental resources in Scotland”, and, in that context, is still a valuable historical document 16 years later. In broad terms, it concluded that “from the High Tops to the bottom of our inshore seas, Scotland has a rich natural heritage, but it is being subjected to pressures of change like never before”.

The report made clear that LINK's objective was to “raise awareness of the state of the Scottish environment, provide a source for debate, and motivate others to further develop similar regular reports and other auditing techniques at the national scale”, and, in all three, it was successful. Roger Crofts, by then Chief Executive at SNH, remembers telling his staff that this was exactly the sort of report they should be

producing, using the statistics available to SNH. And the Scottish Environment Protection Agency has since produced regular State of the Environment reports.

LINK followed this with a short-lived series of *Scottish Environmental Audits* on particular topics. These were rather less influential, at least in part because others had by now risen to the challenge of the first report, but they did have the incidental value of making an invaluable contact for later years – co-author of the *Audit* on planning and sustainable development was Sarah Boyack, then a planning lecturer at Edinburgh College of Art, and later Environment Minister in the Scottish Parliament.

Later, LINK tried to work its magic again on the ‘national parks debate’, which had long polarised views in Scotland. LINK had been chewing over the issue at meetings for several years, but there were strong internal divisions. Simon Pepper recalls that “the angry old men of Loch Lomond had got nowhere, as they saw national parks purely as a landscape protection device”. Other LINK member bodies were unconvinced that the strict geographical focus of national parks was the right answer to the wider problems facing Scotland’s hills. What was needed was an approach much more customised to Scotland, but a 1996 Scottish Office review of natural heritage designations had failed even to consider national parks.

Then the prospect of the 1997 general election invited an opportunistic bid to take the issue forward. John McFall MP had pushed Labour to include plans for national parks in its manifesto. LINK capitalised on the 95% approval rating for national parks in opinion polls, and sought to provide wider inspiration to these proposals through a discussion paper on *Protecting Scotland’s Finest Landscapes* published in May 1997. One key paragraph summarises LINK’s arguments:-

“A new mechanism is required for Scotland, in the form of a top-tier designation, to secure biodiversity and landscape conservation as well as recreation provision, and to encourage appropriate rural development and cultural revival in this special category of landscape where the very quality of the environment attracts the forces that threaten it most.”

The inclusion of the rural development and cultural perspectives was critical in broadening the agenda, and later became a key element of the Labour proposals for national parks in Scotland. By now, mere reports were not enough: LINK also organised two conferences in September 1997 (Stirling) and March 1998 (Inverness) to develop its arguments and bring in wider expertise. Simon Pepper reckons that the masterstroke at the second of these was the involvement of national park managers from Norway, Sweden, France and Austria, who described ambitious plans for a growth in national parks in their countries, against a history of scepticism and resistance. LINK was well aware that comparisons with the English system of national parks had proved sterile and unhelpful in the past, and wanted to concentrate instead on live testimony from elsewhere in Europe – a resource which Simon Pepper emphasises is still too little used.

One person who admitted to being convinced by the Inverness conference was Peter Peacock, a former Highland Council convenor who went on to become a Minister in

the Scottish Parliament. Pepper remembers that, after the court case on the Cairngorms funicular, Peacock had taken him aside and said “you haven’t a clue; you can’t win on a narrow view of the environment”. LINK’s engagement with national parks was a key step in its maturation, presenting a political case, not just an intellectual and emotional perspective, and it proved to be highly influential.

Overall, Bob Aitken says that when LINK decided to take on the national parks issue, “it delivered in crashing style, with impressively credible papers and inspired conferences”. Whenever LINK got the bit between its teeth, he felt a real sense of impetus and determination – and it is vital that LINK guards and maintains that enthusiasm for the future.

2.07: Eyes on the horizon

Corporate planning is unlikely ever to be seen as the most riveting part of any organisation’s work, yet it is vitally important. LINK has always been keen to look forward, to review the challenges ahead for the network and to do all it can, within its resources, to ensure that it is best prepared to help member bodies meet those challenges. Importantly, it has always seen this planning not just as a task for its management and board but as something that should engage all its members.

As early as 1991, less than five years into its existence, LINK held an internal conference to chart its role for the next five years, immediately following on from the review of its effectiveness commissioned by James Fenton (see section 1.3). In September 1991, 25 members and staff met in the convivial surroundings of a guest house in Aberfeldy to discuss the way forward. Unusually, LINK invited a civil servant from the new Scottish Office Environment Department to contribute to the discussions. A key issue for debate was whether LINK was a campaigning or purely a co-ordinating body. According to the published report of the meeting, the conclusion was that it was both: LINK’s job was “to work for the better conservation of Scotland by assisting and enabling the co-ordination of effort and, where appropriate, making common cause (a catalytic and campaigning role)”.

The meeting also included a session called “Jen’s Gripes”, offering the LINK Secretary the opportunity to raise her concerns about how the organisation worked, and thus ensuring the maximum engagement of staff in the review process. Another session looked at how LINK might move from a fire-fighting role to a more proactive agenda; then, as now, Simon Pepper, was calling for LINK to “break the mould: be lateral, have insight, make connections” – a recurring theme for the years ahead.

The meeting concluded that LINK needed a corporate or development plan, and agreed the representation of a subgroup to draw it up. Six months later, six key individuals retreated to another small hotel, this time in Portmohomack, for two days of intensive discussion on the future options, culminating in LINK’s first development plan for 1992-97. Four years later in June 1995, a similar model was

followed to roll forward the development plan for 1996-2000; this time the venue was the Chair's home overlooking Loch Carron in Wester Ross. In his preface to that second development plan, the Chair, Michael Scott, wrote:-

“LINK is much, much more than the sum of its parts. The aim of this Development Plan is to ensure that this special chemistry continues to work for the best benefit of the Scottish environment. It is partly a plan for the staff and Management Team of LINK, but it is mostly a plan for the member bodies who *are* LINK in every corporate sense.”

Both Jen Anderson and Alice Walsh stress how important it was for members to engage fully in the future development of LINK – not least because it helped highlight the constraints on what LINK itself could do for its members, and emphasised that members had to accept responsibility for the majority of actions agreed in the development plan.

Although these early plans were inspired by a shared vision for Scotland, they were internally focussed; Anderson summarises the approach as “we want to save the world, so what can LINK do to help its members achieve that aim”. Subsequent plans moved from development to strategic planning, and were able to become more visionary. The most recent Corporate Strategy, covering 2006-2009, was developed by a Board subgroup following a strategic review in which all member bodies participated (again emphasising the value of engaging all members in the strategic planning process). This corporate strategy includes a vision for LINK:-

“Our vision is to secure, through the collective efforts of our members and by inspiring others, the sustainable development of Scotland where all aspects of the country's environment are valued to enhance the quality of life for all.”

The corporate strategy is developed into an yearly work plan through an annual meeting between the Board and Task Force Convenors, but all member bodies can feed into that process through the task forces to which they contribute.

2.08: ‘As others see us’

Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH) has supported LINK financially from its inception, and generally it has been supportive also in spirit, even if relations with the late Magnus Magnusson as SNH Chairman were sometimes tense. Ian Jardine, SNH's Chief Executive, says it is important for his organisation to support NGOs, as a public representation on environmental issues. If that is the case, he says, then the best value for public money comes from supporting the body that will bring all these diverse organisations together. In the 1990s, he felt it was especially important that no schisms could be found in the environment movement, and he says LINK did an excellent job in ensuring that at least 90 per cent of issues did not become divisive.

That meant the development lobby had to decide that, if it could not divide the movement, then it would have to do business with it.

For SNH, the real value of LINK, Jardine says, is the external insight it offers of what is going on – this was particularly valuable, for example, during the national parks consultation. He sees the need for “a sounding board that doesn’t just make a noise when you hit it, but has something to tell you”.

However, he does feel that, in recent years, LINK may have faded from its finest hour. He feels it has not been especially successful in getting landscape issues up the political agenda, for example. He believes that LINK has lost some of its personalities and some of its impetus as a source of good ideas. He suggests that many of the staff of LINK member bodies now could be (and sometimes are) interchangeable with his own staff, but says he already knows what “today’s modern, professional conservationist” thinks. He would like to see LINK engaging more with the social, health and cultural issues that the Executive is likely to focus on, and he points out how well British Trust for Conservation Volunteers (BTCV Scotland) has played a political role, because it is “wired into the social agenda”.

Jardine’s predecessor at SNH, Roger Crofts, also notes that LINK is now largely represented by paid officials of member bodies. He feels that member bodies are missing a trick by not seeking out experts from within their own membership to help LINK with its work, particularly by contributing to Task Forces. The rules of LINK allow member bodies to appoint anyone as their representative, provided they are empowered to speak for their organisation, and LINK has often sought to draw in wider representation from member bodies through its conferences and Congress, usually with little success. With political agendas becoming more complex and specialised, and with paid staff facing more and more crowded work plans, this is an option which member bodies should keep under review.

Crofts also has some concerns about LINK’s fundamental governance principles, in terms of how it relates to member bodies. He points out, for example, that the NTS has instituted interviews as part of the appointment process for its committee chairs, and wonders how this relates to appointments onto the LINK Board and as Chair or President (although it is fair to record that external LINK Chairs and Presidents have always been appointed following a competitive selection process with interviews).

John Thomson, who has had particular responsibility for relations between SNH and LINK, suggests that public bodies like SNH can operate most effectively if outside bodies like LINK help create a playing field for them, at some remove from the *status quo* associated with government. A public body cannot break government inertia on its own, but needs a lever from elsewhere: sometimes European legislation has provided that lever for SNH, and sometimes pressure from NGOs, representing an important element of public opinion.

Thomson agrees that landscape is probably the weakest area of LINK’s recent work, partly because the relevant NGOs are less well supported and partly because of the complex and disparate nature of the topic, which veers into cultural and

archaeological issues and encompasses urban design as well as the natural heritage. But he praises the work done by Bill Wright of the Association for the Preservation of Rural Scotland (APRS) and John Mayhew of the NTS in raising the profile of the issue, even if the debate has now become seriously diverted by the proliferation of windfarms.

Jim Hunter, a previous chairman of Highlands & Islands Enterprise (HIE), says his engagement with LINK was mostly at the level of “glad-handing meetings”, with the view to ensuring substantive discussions at officer level. He is clear that, in the past, environmental organisations did not engage as well as they should with communities in the Highlands, but says that things have moved on greatly since then, with much more recognition of where Highland communities are coming from. He sees the *Protecting Scotland’s Finest Areas* report as a concrete example of that widening perspective, and hopes that changing attitudes within LINK were a mirror image of what was happening in HIE as it increasingly recognised that the natural environment is one of the greatest assets of the Highlands and Islands.

That view is echoed by the current Chairman of HIE. He commented that the outstanding environmental quality of the Highlands & Islands is recognised as a vital asset for the region, and went on: “Over the past 20 years, LINK has played an important role in pulling together collegiate views on the issues of the day. While our perspectives may sometimes differ, HIE welcomes and shares LINK’s commitment to building a better future for the half of Scotland which our enterprise network serves”.

2.09: A view from the media

Back in the days before LINK, the environment rarely made the news and certainly not the front pages. Simon Pepper recalls meeting in 1986 with Peter Macdonald, environment correspondent for *The Scotsman*, who complained about the lack of useful press material emanating from any conservation body in Scotland, including the NCC and CCS. He said his paper only received about three news releases a year from the SWT and that the most interesting material from the NCC and the RSPB usually came from their headquarters in the south.

LINK helped change all that, although it cannot take all the credit. Over the same period, many of the larger UK member organisations recognised that their operations in Scotland needed greater autonomy, and this gave them the freedom to speak out more frequently. Because LINK has to balance the views of all its member bodies, the statements it can offer the media are sometimes less cutting-edge than the statement that an individual member body can make from its own individual perspective, but when LINK is able to make a joint statement, then its impact is particularly powerful.

According to journalist Rob Edwards, the fact that LINK speaks on behalf of so many voluntary bodies pushes its statements and opinions up the news agenda, and

makes its opinions far more difficult to ignore – even if it does mean that every time he writes a story he has to explain to his readers (and his editors) what LINK is. He says LINK does not have – and, because of its complex nature, may never have – the ‘brand recognition’ of bodies like the RSPB, WWF or Ramblers Association. He also points out that journalists are interested in conflict, rather than harmony, so the fact that 30+ voluntary organisations *agree* on an issue is not, in itself, an easy story for him to sell to his editors!

Edwards admires LINK’s joint statements and reports. He likens them to some of the international conferences he has attended, from which he came away with two impressions: amazement at how people were prepared to stay up until the wee small hours, arguing about the precise nuances of every phrase and punctuation mark – and admiration of them as heroes for doing so. He says LINK is similar, but on a smaller scale. His view is “thank God somebody’s doing it – and thank God it isn’t me!”

He is impressed how LINK has grown from an informal network to a co-ordinated campaign-orientated coalition, although he has some concerns that LINK may be getting too close to Ministers and the Executive, and is less prepared to be openly critical than it used to be. Another media representative, who could not be quoted for this report, raised the same anxiety. Both feel there is a continuing need for organisations with a radical, cutting edge to ensure that the safe political expedients are always challenged.

2.10: Grasping the Parliamentary nettle

“History played into LINK’s hands with the timing of devolution, and LINK was ready for it”, says Simon Pepper. While many of the individuals involved in LINK were intuitively in favour of devolution, there was nervousness about how far LINK, as a charity, could venture into a political issue of this sort, together with concern that some of the Boards of member bodies might be less progressive in their views. Eventually, it was agreed that LINK could sustain a carefully measured argument that a ‘yes-yes’ vote would be good for the environment.

A public statement issued in September 1997, prior to the devolution referendum, commented that the proposals for a devolved Scottish Parliament offered positive prospects for the environment in Scotland, including easier access to scrutinise decision-making, a radical shift in the direction of consensus politics, greater opportunity for innovation in policy making, and closer involvement and awareness of Scottish people in securing the sustainable, long-term future of Scotland’s natural and cultural resources. Looking back from the perspective of eight years of the Parliament, that statement seems measured and perceptive, but it is difficult now to believe how much angst went into agreeing it. It marked a major culture shift within LINK and its members, and Jen Anderson highlights this decision as one of the key stages in LINK’s maturation.

Following the positive outcome of the referendum in September 1997, a number of member bodies got together as the LINK Scottish Parliamentary Group, to monitor and contribute to the working of the Consultative Steering Group that was drawing up plans for the Parliament. The LINK group rapidly concluded that the network needed greater capacity to engage with the parliamentary process, and applied to the National Lottery Charities Board to fund a three-year Parliamentary Officer post. The bid was successful, and, in July 1998, Elspeth Brown (later Alexandra) – a dynamic, young political activist who had worked previously for a Scottish MP at Westminster – took up the post.

Friends of the Earth Scotland always had a somewhat semi-detached relationship with LINK. As its Director, Kevin Dunion was keen to engage FoES only in initiatives where LINK offered a real premium to its work, including the Lingerabay campaign. For him, the decision to engage a Parliamentary Officer made a big difference, partly because it offered real added value to FoES work, but also because it began to push sustainable development messages onto the agendas of the more traditional wildlife and countryside bodies.

Lloyd Austin says that LINK responded well to the opportunities of devolution, because its members responded well. He believes that the appointment to the Parliamentary Officer was an important step-change in the development of LINK. He also notes the perfect location of her office in the High Street of Edinburgh: MSPs passed it every day on the way between their offices and the first debating chamber in the General Assembly building, and this helped keep LINK on their radar.

Several other LINK bodies had appointed parliamentary officers, and they came together as a Parliamentary Forum, working together effectively and easily as an informed network which the new MSPs rapidly came to respect. For other member bodies, whose staff had little time to engage with parliamentary matters, Alexandra's role offered a huge premium to their work. In particular, Alexandra developed good relations with the committee clerks and the SPICE parliamentary information service, which stood LINK in good stead for her successors in later years.

When the Lottery funding came to an end, the membership agreed that this work was so important that it had to be continued. As a result, six of the largest bodies saw a big increase in their LINK subscriptions, but they saw this as a good investment for the future, and continue to support the post until today.

Although Alexandra's role was originally envisaged as an external one of taking LINK's messages to political audiences, in practice she spent a great deal of her time on the internal role of making LINK member bodies a little smarter in their approach to politicians – a task with which she sometimes got understandably impatient, but which laid the groundwork for the more sophisticated political roles that LINK was to adopt later. Sometimes she tried too hard to push LINK out of its comfort zone, suggesting for example that it should join ASPA – the Association of Scottish Public Affairs, an advocacy federation for lobbyists – but consideration of these issues was part of a maturing in LINK as it adapted to the opportunities and challenges that the new Parliament brought.

2.11: A Vital Link

One of the first conclusions of the parliamentary project was that LINK needed to raise its profile, to make clear its relevance to the political agenda. As part of that, a change of name was eventually agreed, after much soul-searching, to Scottish Environment Link in 1999. To further illustrate LINK's legitimacy, a document was compiled for the new parliamentarians called *A Vital Link: a guide to the environment movement in Scotland*. This was launched at a breakfast meeting in Cafe 1812, opposite St Andrew's House in Edinburgh, on the day of the last-ever meeting of the Scottish Grand Committee (the regular meeting of Westminster MPs to discuss exclusively Scottish issues), and with just 100 days to go to the first full meeting of the Scottish parliament.

Speaking at the launch, the LINK Chair, Michael Scott, drew attention to a statistic, put together in the report for the first time, that the 39 member bodies of LINK had more than half a million members in Scotland – one in ten of the population, and more than all the political parties in Scotland combined. His speech emphasised that “people are absolutely central to our vision, and that the wise use of natural resources is very much part of that vision”. He continued: “That is why LINK, to some people's surprise, came out as strong advocates for the Scottish Parliament, and why we look forward to the opportunities and challenges the Parliament will create.” Scott also formally announced the name change of LINK “to more truly reflect our role, and more strongly emphasise our place at the centre of the key issues that face Scotland in the new millennium”.

2.12: A Second Chamber

The arrival of the Scottish Parliament brought many new opportunities and challenges for LINK, and it helped to solidify LINK's position as a key player in the democratic processes of Scotland. Simon Pepper believes that the way LINK dealt with the Scottish Parliament, especially in the early days, has been inspirational to many.

The Parliament was designed to be open (both in its organisation and its building). After 12 years of hammering at politicians' doors, LINK members suddenly found that more and more doors were being opened to usher them in, with all the inevitable workload problems that brought. Indeed, Anne McCall argues that LINK is being invited to contribute to so many initiatives in the Parliament that it will have to learn to prioritise and occasionally to refuse offers. She commented: “LINK needs to be mature enough to make decisions on when it can useful work through this system and when not. If it accepts an invitation and does not deliver anything especially useful, it undermines LINK's case when it does have useful things to say.”

In retrospect, one of the less obvious benefits of the Scottish Parliament is that it is a 'unicameral chamber'. That means the House of Lords has no role in revising legislation. In the past, the Lord's role in environmental legislation often seemed to be ensuring that the legislation would benefit the landowners amongst their lordships. But this change also puts a greater responsibility on everyone in Scotland to scrutinise draft legislation and to influence the proposals emerging from the Parliament.

One of the first pieces of legislation on which LINK concentrated its activities after the opening of the Parliament was the access legislation in the Land Reform Bill. Several LINK member bodies were active participants in the Access Forum which drew up guidance for the forthcoming legislation, but they felt that, in the draft legislation, some of these proposals had been teased apart, tipping the balance in favour of landowners. Reluctantly, LINK took the decision to fight these changes, and, amongst other things, organised a parliamentary petition calling for improved access opportunities, which received a massive 14,550 signatures from individuals and organisations all over Scotland.

Jessica Pepper joined LINK as parliamentary officer while these changes were being debated in March 2001, and is highly praised by many of the interviewees for this report – Bob Aitken describes her as “absolutely the right person in the right place at the right time”. She is particularly proud how LINK gave people a real chance to be involved in this totemic issue in Scotland. And she says the Minister got the message, and personally took responsibility for significant changes in the Bill's wording. LINK also secured a small but critical amendment to the wording of the Bill, so that it was said to be about 'securing' access rights rather than 'creating and regulating' access rights, thus recognising the long tradition of responsible access to the Scottish hills.

Dave Morris of the Ramblers Association says it was vital for LINK to present a clear coalition of view on this issue, because in the past the wildlife bodies had expressed concerns that increased access could lead to increased disturbance and damage – and he pays credit to Lloyd Austin and others for negotiating within their organisations to achieve the eventual consensus that Morris and Austin presented to the Access Forum on behalf of LINK.

To celebrate the successful passage of this momentous piece of legislation, LINK hosted a reception for MSPs, researchers and others in Edinburgh City Chambers on 23rd January 2003.

Several interviewees pointed to LINK's work on the Water Environment & Water Services Bill as another huge success. As well as LINK's own Parliamentary Officer, Jessica Pepper, three policy officers from LINK member bodies also played a key role – the 'three witches' as they were affectionately known: Caroline Davies from the RSPB, Lisa Schneidau from SWT and Becky Wills (now Boyd) from WWF.

This quartet worked hard to persuade MSPs on the Transport and Environment Committee to take a holistic, systems view of how the water environment worked.

During the parliamentary recess in August 2002, they took them to the Insh Marshes in Inverness-shire to view different approaches to flood management, and to impress upon them, that, without this natural flood meadow, Aviemore would regularly be underwater. As a result, they won a key commitment in the Stage 1 report to introduce a general duty to promote sustainable flood management – a first for Europe – and, as part of that approach, secured a definition of the water environment in Stage 2 to include wetlands (although Jessica Pepper remembers with amusement how the parliamentary draftsmen tried to define wetlands as ‘any land that is wet’ – a definition that would have included most of Scotland most of the time!).

LINK also helped persuade the Committee to include measures for sub-basin planning and for a structure that would allow the active engagement of local people in the process. The concept of requiring the Minister to make an annual report on progress to the Parliament was also an important precedent that LINK won with this Bill.

Writing in *The LINK Newsletter* at the time, Becky Wills commented:-

“It should be born in mind that almost every amendment tabled was prompted by LINK, and the final result was fantastic, beyond the wildest dreams of the [LINK Freshwater] Task Force, and heralded by MSPs, the Minister and civil servants alike as a major success for Scotland’s parliamentary process and sustainable development”

The LINK annual report later paid tribute to the ‘three witches’, and noted:-

“This was an example of LINK at its best, with a shared vision, close co-operation, each organisation playing to its strengths, and invaluable back-up from LINK’s Parliamentary Officer. A magic brew!”

2.13: The Road to ‘everyone’

Almost every interviewee consulted for this report highlighted one other initiative as perhaps the most significant of all the step-changes during LINK’s twenty-year history: LINK’s direct engagement in the 2003 parliamentary election, repeated in 2007, through the **everyone** Campaign. The 2003 campaign highlighted six demands for a better environment in Scotland: clean air, safe food, healthy seas, less landfill, protection for wildlife and wild places, and a reduction in climate change gases. It thus embedded LINK’s traditional interests in the much broader context of environmental justice.

Simon Pepper recalls how **everyone** was born out of the necessity to keep a key player engaged with LINK. As a formidable lobbyist in its own right, FoES was often look-warm about the benefits that LINK offered it. Around 2002, Kevin Dunion, then the FoES director, was threatening to take the organisation out of LINK, and Pepper had a discussion with him on an Edinburgh street. Pepper argued

that he needed Dunion's help to transform LINK and take it into the political mainstream with a more unified agenda – and the eventual result of their deliberations together was **everyone**.

Dunion agrees that **everyone** was a major step-change, not least because it gave a home to some very professional individuals, with strong political campaigning instincts, who felt somewhat isolated within their own organisations. He remembers a meeting to discuss the campaign held at the NTS offices, and said it was startling to find that the NTS and other, more traditional LINK member bodies were prepared to pay into the wider sustainable development agenda that **everyone** espoused.

LINK commissioned the Leith Agency to produce an image for the campaign – graphics and a logo – and they worked with some of the key movers in LINK to develop the **everyone** name. It was seen as audacious, because it made no mention of LINK or the environment, but that in itself was part of its impact. Jessica Pepper says it shows how much LINK can achieve when it has the confidence and trust of its membership.

It was also important that **everyone** was fronted up by the Directors of member bodies, who had previously engaged little in the day-to-day working of LINK. Dunion recalls the launch of **everyone** as the first time in four years that all of these key people had come together in the same room, because there had never been a good reason to get together before then. That alone was a major benefit of **everyone**, and helped to ensure that the member bodies improved the professionalism of their own approaches to match the professionalism that LINK was trying to achieve jointly.

As a journalist, Rob Edwards remembers **everyone** as a LINK initiative that he simply *had* to take notice of! It took account of the combined LINK constituency, but “welded this together into a solid, coherent profile as a genuine coalition of organisations”, and it was helped, he says, by some very effective marketing and PR work. Françoise van Buuren, NTS communications manager during the early days of **everyone** and now a LINK Board member, felt it was important that LINK played to its collective strengths and “demonstrated that the issues being raised were of such importance that a wide range of organisations with differing priorities were able to agree on what action is required to address environmental and heritage needs in Scotland”. She adds: “It is hard to know if the **everyone** campaign influenced how people voted, but it is pleasing to note that MSPs with a ‘green’ agenda elected to the Scottish Parliament increased significantly in the 2003 elections” (even if other issues perhaps intervened in voting patterns in 2007).

Scottish Environment Week was another idea floated and developed by the Parliamentary Officer. It is a “great shop window for the Scottish environment”, although it does not particularly focus on LINK. It is regarded by many as a great success, enthusiastically supported by Ministers, and represents part of the overall ‘mainstreaming’ of environmental concerns.

More recently, Kevin Dunion (now Scotland's Information Commissioner) cites the LINK hustings debate in the 2007 election as an excellent, highly professional event and says it "speaks volumes for LINK's ambitions" – in all, LINK organised 18 hustings events around Scotland in 2007, building on the 11 events it organised at the previous election. Dunion sees LINK as "a repository of expertise and agenda-setting at a time of great political flux".

3: TOWARDS 2027

Typically of LINK, the group set up to commission this report, as part of the 20th anniversary celebrations, were keen that it should not dwell exclusively on past history and trumpet long-gone successes. Rather they wanted it to reflect on twenty years of experience, and to draw some lessons from this for the next 20 years, towards 2027. The comments which follow are based, in part, on the views of “old hands” (or some less-polite phrase) of LINK, including the report’s author.

As the report has hopefully shown, times have changed since the early days of LINK in very significant ways. The founder members no longer have the monopoly of wisdom (if they ever did), but the suggestions below are respectfully offered for consideration by the next LINK generation!

3.1: Back to Basics

LINK has achieved much in its first two decades, and the tools and working methods it has developed will stand it in good stead for the next twenty years. Nobody spoken to for this report has advocated any major change of direction, and the main message seems to be that LINK should build incrementally on the past successes described in section 2 of this report. But, in doing so, it is important not to lose sight of the first principles upon which LINK was founded.

There is unease, both in the Management Team and amongst some member bodies, that Drennan Watson’s analogy of LINK as a “bus to Ministers” was somewhat lost during the last administration, as a result of the approach adopted by Ross Finnie, Minister for the Environment and Rural Development. He instigated a quarterly schedule of meetings with NGO Heads, and included a place in these meetings for a single representative from LINK. This was quickly negotiated up to two places in recognition of LINK’s networking role, but, even so, this lost the fundamental principle that LINK facilitated access for any and all of its member bodies.

The founders of LINK would have been astonished and delighted at the prospect of such regular Ministerial access, but it is unlikely that they would have allowed the Minister to dictate terms in this way. Equally, Ministers (and other senior officials) need to recognise that, by meeting with one or two representatives of LINK they are *not* meeting with all the network. It may be awkward for officials to brief Ministers when an apparent rag-bag of individuals from widely diverging organisations are invited to their meeting table – but that is precisely what LINK is, for all the effort that it makes ahead of meetings to agree common lines of debate. That very divergence is the strength of LINK, and Ministers and others ignore that strength at their peril. At least occasionally, LINK should seek to reconstitute the “open bus to Victoria Quay”, and it should remind Ministers of the importance of meeting with the whole spectrum of LINK bodies, large and small. Perhaps the change to a new political administration in 2007 will make such a change easier.

The importance of assisting small member bodies within LINK – especially those without any staff – is something that should never be overlooked. Drennan Watson says the larger member bodies should always be asking what the small bodies can do that they cannot do, and should be trying to help them develop. He notes that the smaller LINK bodies are still predominantly concentrated around the Cairngorms, and wonders why initiatives like the Isle of Arran Seabed Trust have never been encouraged into the LINK fold.

Small, grass-roots organisations offer formidable local expertise and a broadened perspective to LINK, although they need to be approached with great care: some are driven by the self-interest of strong-willed individuals, they often seek to engage only the like-minded and can be profoundly undemocratic in their ways of operating. Care would need to be taken, for example, to ensure that the current proliferation of single-interest anti-windfarm groups did not subvert LINK’s balanced agenda – but it is also worth remembering that LINK itself evolved from groups who met first in the battle against another kind of development in the Scottish hills.

Originally LINK plenary meetings were held in the evenings, and people like Pat Wells drove down from Inverness-shire when they finished work at their “day job”. Now, with the agreement of all member bodies, meetings are held in daytime. This suits both paid officers and retired volunteers representing the smaller bodies. But it is important to check that this does not become self-selecting, and exclude other bodies which might make a major contribution to LINK if meetings were held at a time their representatives could manage.

Perhaps just as significantly, Lloyd Austin points out that the sheer deluge of emails and information emanating from LINK risks putting off small organisations, especially those run by volunteers. LINK should consider ways to nurture potential new member bodies and offer them support in capacity building, as part of a coherent strategy to broaden its representation. After all, the North East Mountain Trust is just such a small, local organisation, yet it provided LINK with its founding chairman, and voluntary officers like Pat Wells from the Badenoch & Strathspey Conservation Group, Jill Harden from the Council for Scottish Archaeology and John Pringle from the Scottish Wild Land Group – all small member bodies – have played vital roles in the development of the multi-faceted organisation that LINK is today.

3.2: The renewable challenge

As this report has shown, LINK has never shied from challenges: proposals for national parks or to consolidate the right to roam could have generated major fracture lines within the alliance, but instead LINK sought to find a compromise to which all members could sign up, and this greatly strengthened the case put forward by all member bodies, jointly and severally.

In 2007, renewable energy developments, and especially windfarms, continue to be a highly vexatious issue for LINK. For example, Dave Morris of the RAS complains

that so many of the big players in LINK are not prepared to oppose giant pylons or the Beaully-Denny power line, and, he says, take an almost antagonistic approach to those who do. Partly because of that, he is talking about establishing a recreational and landscape grouping in parallel to LINK to advance the outdoor recreation cause – a proposal that could disassemble the broad remit in which LINK has always prided itself. Pat Wells is now fighting Highland windfarms with as much determination as she once fought ski developments in the Cairngorms, and she too feels disenfranchised by LINK.

The problem for LINK is that everyone is right in the stances they are taken. FoES and WWFS are right to raise concerns about the huge damage that climate change will do to the Scottish environment, and are right to suggest that hard, and often unpalatable, decisions will need to be taken if that damage is to be ameliorated. But the Ramblers Association, Mountaineering Council of Scotland and similar bodies are also right to represent their members' concerns about the huge damage that windfarms will do to landscape and countryside amenity, while the RSPB and SWT are right to concentrate their efforts on proposals that will cause direct impact of the birds and wildlife for which their members have given them responsibility.

Against this background, LINK has developed a common stance on energy issues, and has worked to promote the need for strategic locational guidance. But the problem for LINK is that the past political administration chose not to adopt this approach. In a deliberate political decision, it decided to offer no strategic direction to the renewables industry, and to rely entirely on the free market for delivery (although perhaps this may change with the new SNP administration). The resulting free-for-all means that there is no strategic approach around which LINK can unite, and so member bodies have been left with no choice but to respond to the proliferation of individual proposals on the basis of their own varying remits, with all the potential for conflict this brings.

Anne McColl from the RSPB, who convenes the LINK Planning Task Force, describes the fragile energy consensus within LINK as a “sticking plaster”. Dan Barlow, Head of Policy at WWF Scotland and a member of the LINK Board, agrees with this perception, but notes that this fragile consensus has held remarkably well to date. He emphasises that the sharing of understanding that LINK has brought about has allowed all bodies to move their position a little to recognise the wider perspectives within the network, while not conceding the individual focus that comes with their own specific remits.

Nevertheless, the ramifications of the energy issue – from the Beaully-Denny power line inquiry to the forthcoming Climate Bill, the Strategic Environmental Assessment of wave and tidal power, the SNP's proposed review of offshore wind, the intensive cultivation for biofuels, and debates about the place of nuclear energy – provide a potential set of traps, around which it will take all the skills that LINK can muster to negotiate. However, it is also clear that, if renewables energy policy creates fissures between bodies dedicated to the global environment, the natural heritage of Scotland, the Scottish landscape and its recreational uses, then it is, not LINK, but the policy itself that is fatally flawed. LINK needs offer leadership in addressing this issue, just

as its founders did in the case of Lurchers Gully in the 1980s, attacking not just individual development proposals, but the policy miasma in which decisions have to be taken. Scotland fostered the Enlightenment; surely it is not beyond the imagination of modern Scots to forge an energy policy that takes the lead in saving the planet while at the same time protecting the natural landscapes and wildlife that makes Scotland so special.

3.3: New pathways to Civic Scotland

Simon Pepper recollects that Drennan Watson, in one of his many guiding aphorisms, used to say that, when LINK representatives met with officials in the Scottish Office, they needed to leave toothmarks in the official's backsides, because nothing else would leave a lasting impression! Today, several interviewees for this report expressed concern that LINK was getting too cosy with Ministers and the Scottish Executive. Rob Edwards, for example, worries that this is making LINK less prepared to be openly critical than it used to be. Another media representative, who could not be quoted for this report, raised the same anxiety. Both feel there remains a need for organisations with a radical, cutting edge, to ensure that the safe political expedients are always challenged.

John Mayhew, LINK chairman since 2006, recognises that “the more we are invited onto stakeholder groups, the more we get locked into the Executive, and the less time we have to *lead* the agenda”. Roger Crofts also warned that LINK should “be careful about getting too close with Ministers and officials; you have to be able to step back and say you don't agree”. It is too early to tell whether that closeness will persist with the new SNP administration, although it is difficult to see how a minority administration could function without developing these civic links still further

Tim Birley points out there are two limits to the comfort zone between government and NGOs – if they become so close, especially financially, that the NGO is effectively neutered, but, at the other extreme, if the relationship of trust is fractured and the NGO becomes excluded. However Kevin Dunion says this is where LINK can offer some solace. They no longer have to fear being ostracised as a result of upsetting Ministers with a particularly hard-hitting campaign, because they can continue to contribute to internal discussions through LINK, safe in the knowledge that the Scottish Executive cannot now afford to exclude LINK from discussions on environmental issues.

Simon Pepper has a different perspective, based perhaps on his own engagement with bodies like the Ministerial Group on Sustainable Development. He believes that the relationship between the Executive and NGOs is bound to be cyclical, going from aggressive harassment of officials (especially evident when LINK began), to the gradual opening of doors, the progressive engagement of individuals from the network in the political process, a change in internal culture to support the cause, then developing complacency and the need for new waves of pressure to move the agenda on. He feels LINK has reached the last of these stages in 2007 (although

perhaps it was the electorate in May 2007 who provided the main stimulus for change).

LINK Vice-chair Deborah Long says that, although the Executive and MSPs are now comfortable about working with LINK, they have to respect LINK's right to be critical where necessary. She believes that NGOs must point out inadequacies of government when they arise, but they must also bring their membership on board when government is doing the right thing. She cites work by the LINK Biodiversity Task Force in March 2007, extracting Scottish data from a progress report on the UK Biodiversity Action Plan and showing from this that the Executive was not meeting the EU target of stopping biodiversity loss by 2010. The report dominated the front page of *The Scotsman* – and Executive officials are still smarting from the resulting publicity!

More widely, one interviewee who wishes to be unnamed believes there is a risk of a new democratic deficit emerging. He sees the policy community being based increasingly around a “small club” of MPs and ex-MPs, MSPs and ex-MSPs, councillors, ex-local authority directors and ‘quangocrats’, from Labour in urban areas and the Liberal-Democrats in rural areas, who “go round and round a rotation of office”. Anyone who has an actual interest in, and knowledge of, their subject is excluded from the political process, he suggests, whether they come from environmental Scotland, business Scotland, spiritual Scotland or whatever.

He cites as an example the 2007 appointments to SNH: a former director of SEPA, a former policy director from the forestry quango in Northern Ireland, the former Liberal Democrat deputy leader of Dumfries & Galloway Council and the former Labour leader of Edinburgh Council, while reappointments include the former chairman of Highlands & Islands Enterprise. Other members of the SNH Board include the former leaders of Dumfries & Galloway and Dundee Councils and a former civil servant who retired from the Scottish Office in 2002. Only the chairman has had any past association with environmental NGOs, and even he moved across to the SNH post from his former post as Chairman of the Cairngorms National Park Authority! Despite being an organisation based around science, there is not a single scientist on the SNH Board, so that the organisation's Scientific Advisory Committee is chaired by Jim Hunter, the crofting historian and former chairman of Highlands & Islands Enterprise.

In the early days of the Scottish Parliament, LINK seemed to make progress in showing that having its leading lights could make a significant contribution to the work of national environmental agencies and boards, without provoking conflicts of interest. Ministers appointed experienced LINK campaigners like Simon Pepper, Kevin Dunion, Michael Scott and Bob Aitken onto national boards, and welcomed the constructive roles they were able to play. Now, however, there seems to be a retrenchment to ‘safe’ political place-men, who are recycled from one Board appointment to another.

Ironically these fears exactly mirror LINK's concerns when it first met with the Scottish Office back in March 1988. Now it would seem that LINK must become

active once more on questions of governance and stakeholder engagement, areas where LINK can play a significant role and might find unusual allies – and it will be interesting to see how the SNP administration approaches appointments to those public bodies and agencies that it has not amalgamated.

3.4: The quest for big ideas

It is abundantly clear that there are major challenges ahead for LINK and its member bodies, not least in the wholesale changes that will come with climate change. Fred Edwards points out that thinking of climate change as one issue, rather than a series of connected issues, can lead to problems of approach, and he argues that climate change needs to be viewed primarily as a failure of sustainability. He says that the government's commitment to sustainable development (at the UK and Scottish level) is still window dressing: if there was an economic downturn tomorrow, sustainability would go out the window, and politicians would revert to acute short-termism (others might question whether politicians have ever weaned themselves off acute short-termism!). On the other hand, if the economy holds up, there is a risk that the government could actually get ahead of the public on these issues, in which case LINK and its members would need to change their targets to the public.

Marine issues pose similar challenges. Robin Pellew comments: “Scotland has probably the richest inshore marine resource in the north-east Atlantic in terms of its biological and scenic diversity, yet it is grossly under-valued and under-protected. This is an area where LINK can really make a difference, by adding to the efforts of other NGOs in the public arena.”

Deborah Long raises another issue that might still come back to haunt LINK: the cultivation of Genetically Modified crops. Facing up to all these different issues will require new approaches and innovative ways of thinking. Alice Walsh is keen to emphasise that LINK cannot make these changes by itself: members need to readjust their agendas before the network can adjust, she says. Dan Barlow emphasises the need to balance new approaches with the tried and tested techniques which have worked well for LINK over its first twenty years. He is concerned that some member bodies are slow on their feet when it comes to new agendas, partly because of the need to win over their executive boards, but he believes there will always be individuals who will work with determination to move agendas onwards.

Indeed, it is clear that the discontinuity between political vision and public opinion that Edwards referred to is already happening. Politicians have argued that it would be political suicide to introduce restraints on cheap flights and airport expansion, or to press for a system of road pricing that is sufficiently stringent to stimulate changes in public behaviour. Yet major changes of behaviour will be essential for society to restrain the extent of climate chaos. That means that LINK member bodies will have to target their energies increasingly at public, rather than political, opinion. It might even mean developing non-partisan alliances with politicians, so they can jointly promote the case for changes in societal attitudes.

Several people have suggested that, as LINK member bodies have become more successful, better resourced and thus more professionally staffed, they have also become more sectoral in their perspectives, losing their broader overview and the ability to adapt quickly to new opportunities. Yet it is also clear that there is no shortage of “big thinkers”, imagination, commitment and determination amongst the newer generation of LINK. Jen Anderson is keen to emphasise that they are just as committed as the “grey beards” from LINK’s early days. Anne McCall says she is “tremendously in awe of the ideas and creativity” that emerge from LINK, and there is no doubt that the Board and Task Force convenors, inspired by their outgoing President, are already beginning to develop new thinking on the challenges that face LINK and its member bodies.

There is an almost universal feeling amongst those consulted for this report that LINK needs to be much better at engaging with wider political initiatives – on health, food and social inclusion, for example, and on the areas of environmental justice in which bodies like FoES and BTCV have been most active. There is also concern that, in moving outwards, LINK might lose sight of its ‘core values’. Balancing that tension will be a real challenge.

David Jamieson, Director of BTCV Scotland, offers one vision for the future:-

“LINK – like most environmental organisations – still preaches largely to the converted, because it mainly talks with those people/organisations involved in environmental issues. It needs to start influencing, and bringing on board, those areas of civic society and policy areas that really influence government agendas and societal behaviours – commerce, retail, local government, education, public services etc. The current climate (no pun intended) offers a real opportunity to ‘seize the day’.”

There are signs that the need to address wider agendas is already being recognised: in early 2007, for example, the LINK Chairman and President were invited to a ‘Chatham House rules’ meeting in the Scottish Executive, involving a wide range of key stakeholders such as Scottish Enterprise, the Royal Town & Country Planning Institute and Forestry Commission. Its aim was to look beyond the forthcoming election and consider how to move from legislation to delivery on environmental issues.

John Thomson of SNH agrees it would be helpful to have a mechanism in place that allowed horizon-scanning on policy solutions five years or so ahead of the game, and to ensure this is plugged into the political system. For example, he suggests that the implications of climate change need much more detailed consideration: the role of whole countryside and seascape approaches and of habitat networks in response, and the balance between adaptation and mitigation on the ground.

Traditionally LINK has addressed such issues with a variety of highly-targeted seminars and conferences, including an annual event as part of its Congress. However, Drennan Watson worries that these pour out far too much information, and offer too little time for analysis (as a broad guide, he says, analysis should take twice

as long as the initial provision of data). His criticism is not matched by feedback from participants, who regularly rate these events as successful and enjoyable. However, although meetings of this sort can draw in a targeted audience and stimulate useful discussion, they allow no time to develop relationships, and build up trust and mutual understanding. That requires alternative approaches and longer-term partnership models.

One way forward might be to establish some form of wider social forum at which key rural, urban and marine issues can be considered. Lloyd Austin describes this as a need to link up 'Civic Scotland' with 'Policy Scotland'. He points out how limited policy research now is, outwith the public sector of the Executive and its family of quangoes. Analysis by the media is virtually absent, the political parties have few resources for 'blue-sky thinking', the whipping system in the Parliament previously constrained the freedom of parliamentary committees, which were turned into "legislative sausage machines", and academia is entirely driven by where the money will come from, and thus by the research agenda of the Executive and its agencies.

As Austin notes, there are only three 'think-tanks' in Scotland – the Scottish Council Foundation, the Institute for Scottish Affairs, and the Scottish Centre for Public Policy – and these are poorly resourced. There is a real opportunity if LINK, and its equivalent networks in other areas of Civic Scotland, could come together in a forum for 'out-of-the-box' thinking.

There are exemplars, however flawed: the old Forum on the Rural Environment, for example, or the current Scottish Sustainable Development Forum. Experience shows that these are only as good as the leadership they receive, and only prosper as long as their participants focus their creativity and imagination through them.

Taking up such an opportunity might mean engaging sections of member organisations other than those responsible for policy and planning, including colleagues from the press office, public affairs, fundraising and land management, for example – and it might help to better engage Chief Executives, something to which LINK has long aspired, but rarely achieved. Anne McCall recognises the need to harness more of the creative energy in member organisations. There are lots of talented and committed people working with enthusiasm in their own 'silos', she says, but she is not sure that LINK always makes the most of that available talent.

Most of the interviews for this report were conducted before the ground-shifting Scottish election in May 2007. As this report was completed, LINK members were still coming to terms with what a minority administration would mean for LINK's future work. On the positive side, environmental issues were on political agendas in the election like never before, even if they were eclipsed by other issues on the night. Dan Barlow believes that LINK can ride that wave of environmental enthusiasm, but he says LINK needs to respond quickly to the opportunity it presents. He says there were bold commitments in the manifestos and a broad agreement with LINK on priorities. To achieve anything, the new administration will need to work through consensus, and LINK can help broker that consensus.

Having been “whipped to death” under the last administration, the parliamentary committee system will come into its own in the new, hung parliament, according to Anne McCall. Committee members will need to agree objectives and then work to achieve these objectives, putting party dogma to one side. Dan Barlow believes that the committees will have huge power to change legislation, and says that, as a result, the onus will be on Ministers and the Executive to get the legislation right in the first instance – and LINK Task Forces should offer to help them with that process.

However, Barlow fears that the workings of the new parliament might put huge strains on relations with Westminster and Brussels. LINK has engaged less at these levels in recent years, as a result of resource issues. However, many key decisions for Scotland are still taken at these levels of government, and southern colleagues from UK-based organisations are not always best informed about Scottish needs. Barlow also points out that a lot of lobbying goes on in Brussels by interests counter to those of LINK, yet LINK can only dedicate limited resources to responding. As LINK faces up to the new parliament, therefore, it may need to adopt new perspectives and new approaches.

Through its member bodies, LINK perfected many excellent ways of working in its first twenty years, but it never shied away from also testing innovative techniques, forging new alliances, or bringing in radicals from elsewhere to shake up its perceptions. It will need all its inspiration, and the best of both old and new approaches, if it is to rise to the challenge of its second two decades.

Simon Pepper expresses better than anyone the common view of virtually all the interviewees for this report on the need for change: “It is time to encourage environmental bodies to think and act out of the box, be exciting, take risks, attract attention, challenge shibboleths, expose the bogged down for being bogged down, loosen up the white-knuckle grip on precious old issues, and think of ways of generating new alliances of support for fresh, new, creative approaches.” With its tight resources, LINK can only act as a catalyst for that process; LINK member bodies will need to significantly reprioritise their work and redefine their own structures and operating principles if they are going to rise to this challenge for the next two decades.

The author: Michael Scott was commissioned to write this report because of his long association with LINK. He attended his first LINK meeting in May 1987, joined the Management Team in 1991, became chair of the Management Team in 1994, and was LINK Chair from 1995 to 1999. From 1999 to 2005, he had a different perspective on LINK, as Deputy Chair of SNH. However he has compiled this report, on the basis of interviews with key representatives and associates of LINK, purely in a personal capacity.