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Fun & Games On The Forth: Some Thoughts On The 'Forth Green Freeport' From A 'Political Artist'

The so-called '*Forth Green Freeport*' is one of two in Scotland. The other, located in the North East, encircles the Black Isle and Cromarty Firth. The Forth '*freeport*', or '*Special Economic Zone*', envelops a large swathe of the Edinburgh and Fife conurbation. Its boundaries stretch from Falkirk to Portobello and from Burntisland to Loanhead. In total, it covers 45km and encompasses Edinburgh airport,¹ Grangemouth and Rosyth.

The '*ambition*' of the '*freeport*' is to create 50,000 '*green*' jobs and the good people on £72k + benefits behind bullet-proof glass at Holyrood '*believe*' it will '*make a major contribution to Scotland achieving its net zero carbon emissions targets*'. Private investors in this '*accelerated green pathway*', backed by public money, benefit from financial incentives such as '*enhanced capital allowances*', '*employer's national insurance contributions relief*', '*land and building transaction tax relief*', '*duty suspension*', '*duty flexibility*', '*duty exemption*', and '*simplified import declarations*'. The consortium behind the Forth '*freeport*', like the one in Cromarty, is a State-corporate nexus including, amongst others, Edinburgh Council, Ineos (one of the world's largest petro-chemical companies), Babcock's (manufacturers of WMD), Heriot Watt university and various '*private equity*' companies.

What then, might we ask, as '*the tax sites go live*', is the liberal-minded Scottish easel-painter to make of all this? What impact will '*expanded logistics*' and a '*just transition*' have upon the conscientious artists of Lothian and Fife as they prime yet another canvas? No need to worry! The powers-that-be, namely a former Lloyds banker, a billionaire Brexiteer and a company who repaired a nuclear sub with a tube of superglue,² can reassure producers of traditional seascapes and Will MacLean-esque assemblages of driftwood and fishing industry detritus that the '*accelerated green pathway*' is in the safe hands of Scotia's finest '*cluster partners*'. No doubt, the 8,900 children living in poverty in Granton will feel a sense of relief knowing the '*tax burden*' has been significantly reduced for such altruistic souls.

With such existential threats to West Pilton and Muirhouse neatly expunged, the '*green investment zone*' can develop apace and production of the next Eardleyish gestural tribute can go on unmolested. Don't worry! Sightings of conning towers and plastic pellets popping up from beneath the latest swatch of impasto ultramarine are merely signs of a redundant shoreline transforming into a '*hot bed of innovation*'.

In 1945, Clement Attlee's Labour government implemented a programme of social and economic reconstruction³ in post-war Britain. For the first time in the UK, statutory labour rights such as holidays, sick pay, pensions and the right to a minimum of work were enshrined in the relationship between employer and worker. Defined by its attempts to eradicate '*Want...Disease, Ignorance, Squalor, and Idleness*', this socially-purposive project embodied the country's move to a mixed economy, a universalist welfare state and nationalisation of the utilities. This concord, designed in the aftermath of a 1930s scarred by the horrors of poverty, ethno-nationalism and slaughter, was unprecedented in the history of British labour relations. For my maternal grandfather Jimmy Newlands, a docker at Leith, the latter was particularly significant given that for many years dockers such as him, and his brother-in-law Alec (a communist and shop-steward), had suffered the indignities of casualised labour and

¹ Edinburgh Airport is owned by French company, Vinci SA.

² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/01/royal-navy-orders-investigation-into-nuclear-submarine-repaired-with-glue>

³ The so-called British post-war consensus, developed by John Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge, was influenced by Roosevelt's New Deal and the Five Year Plans of the USSR.

'non-contract' hiring.

So, maybe I'm just being paranoid? Being a '*political artist*' can be tiring! Perhaps the corporate sloganeering is true and it'll all be ok? Maybe the not so nice things that happen to '*freeports*' in other parts of the world won't happen in Bonnie Scotland and we'll be spared the cronyism, corruption, tax avoidance (by '*letter-box*' and '*shell*' companies), money-laundering, misguided infrastructure spending, lack of a green agenda, inadequate bureaucracy, non-unionised workers, the incentivisation of lobbying companies, tax benefits for the few, closed systems, the throwing of money at unprofitable projects, '*superior*' performance at the expense of other areas, lack of local authority oversight⁴ and smuggling.

Maybe the artists will get a shiny new building and receive some much-needed dough from a corporate entity whose shareholders have just rejected the most recent climate change resolution.⁵ Who knows? Perhaps I just need to try harder to believe in the autonomous object? Or maybe, in a rare moment between private helicopters, one of our esteemed corporate leaders might swing past and buy a reasonably priced ink on paper (unframed)?

So if the composition is unbalanced, if it's hard to work *plein-air* because of the smoke and the seascapes are ruined by those pellets that keep washing up, then maybe we can join the kids from Granton? They'll be teenagers by then and we can all traipse along to the local '*skills accelerator centre*' for some '*simulator training*'? Maybe they'll tell us something about identity, place and belonging when we're there? Who knows? Maybe I'm just being nostalgic?

Martin Fowler
July 2024

⁴ On a committee of 12, only 1 person represents Edinburgh Local Authority.

⁵ In 2021, shareholders of the Japanese company Sumitomo rejected the company's climate change resolution.

