



West Princes Street Gardens – Concerts and related issues

Full response of Professor Cliff Hague to The Scotsman, 14 August 21018

Scotsman - "Do you think West Princes Street Gardens should still be used for major pop and rock concerts?"

CH - Like many others my concerns have grown as it seems like every square metre of the city centre is being viewed as a means of raising revenue. This also links to the disruption such events cause before, during and after the event itself. Personally, I have not had problems with the Fireworks at the end of the Festival which depend on the setting of the castle to add to the spectacle: but I am less convinced by the necessity to stage 'major pop and rock concerts' in the Gardens, since they do not depend on the setting in the same way, re managed in a more exclusive way (as we have seen with the recent controversy about boarding off views into the gardens) and we have other venues where such concerts are held, plus a new concert hall coming on stream through the City Deal. In these circumstances the case for holding such events in the Gardens is not compelling.

Scotsman - "Should the number of major events in West Princes Street Gardens be limited each year, including the festival fireworks and Hogmanay concert."

CH - Personally I think the number of major events should be limited, for reasons outlined above. However, the Cockburn Association believes that the matter is one on which all citizens should have a chance to have a say. We seem to have been creeping towards a situation where the number of events has increased without proper public consultation, and despite mounting evidence of public concerns about how some of the negative impacts of tourism growth are being managed.

Scotsman - "Should the council consider an alternative site for the above events, including the festival fireworks and Hogmanay concert?"

CH - As indicated, personally I am OK with the fireworks concert, less so with Hogmanay, where the concert adds to the sense that the whole city centre is a theme park, and we do have music venues elsewhere in the city.

Scotsman - "What type of events do you think are acceptable to be staged in Princes Street Gardens?" *Events that are acceptable in gardens?*

CH - Events that add to, rather than detract from, the prime purpose of the gardens which is to provide a shared public space in the centre of the city with great views and high quality horticulture, a place to sit in and enjoy the garden as a place where there is tranquillity but also where part of the 'entertainment' is watching others enjoying the place in their different ways. These are likely to be predominantly low key and recognise that the gardens are for all - from children to pensioners, residents and visitors.

Scotsman - "Up to 200 events of different sizes are proposed to be staged in the gardens under the proposed new management regime. Is this acceptable and if not, how many are acceptable?"

CH - We do not quite know just what those events will amount to, how many will be in the 'world class' new bandstand or in the new visitor centre to be dug down from Princes St. We do not know if an 'event' will last 20 minutes or 4 hours, or if you will have to pay to see it, or even be allowed to peep over from Princes St. Without more information it is difficult to take a clear view and impossible sensibly to specify a maximum number. The concern is that the 200 figure seems to imply that revenue chasing will be central to the new management proposed for the Gardens.

Scotsman - "Can you think of any alternative sites for major outdoor events that would alleviate pressure on Princes Street Gardens, and of course Princes Street?"

CH - There has been a growing feeling over the last couple of years, backed by evidence, that during 'peak Festival' the city centre's capacity to absorb tourists has been exceeded, and that part of the solution is to disperse some of the activity. Leith Links comes to mind as a major space that could be looked at, and I would like to see whether there are options in other parts of the city. Edinburgh remains a small city, so it should be possible to draw events and patrons to parts outside of the centre, and seek to link them with local communities and start-up initiatives. Doors Open Day, run each year by the Cockburn Association, is an example of how places all around (and beyond) the city have a story to tell and attract visitors.

Scotsman - "Is it acceptable for bus stops to be closed and access to the pavement on Princes Street restricted during major events?"

CH - No, the buses are a major factor in the vibrancy of Edinburgh, and we should be very careful not to disrupt the quality of service they provide. We are trying to boost travel by bus and by walking: there needs to be consistency in policy and practice.

Scotsman - "How concerned are you that the current plans to redevelop Princes Street Gardens and hand over control to an arms-length operator will lead to further commercialisation of the park, increased pressure from promoters and reduced access for ordinary members of the public?"

CH - Such concerns prompted the Cockburn's intervention back in March, when we called for public consultation before any deal was done. Without our action then, hand-over to the arms-length external operator would already have happened. I stand by the idea of 'The Right to the City' which has international support, to deliver the UN's Sustainable Development Goals everywhere, including in Edinburgh. Even with the consultation that is now taking place we do not know whether the proposed ALEO would reduce access for ordinary members of the public. In fairness to those promoting the ALEO, that may not happen. However, the concern I have is that by taking the pre-emptive decision to go for an ambitious but also expensive scheme, the ALEO will find itself pressed towards commercialisation and exclusion.

END