Stonehenge backroom deals in New Delhi threaten site

Stonehenge Alliance Press Release

The UK appears to have persuaded Kenya to front a damaging amendment [1] to the World Heritage Committee's draft recommendation on Stonehenge World Heritage Site. The Committee which is meeting in New Delhi in India this week [2], is likely to discuss the draft report on Stonehenge tomorrow, Wednesday, or on Thursday. The report recommends that the site be placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger as a result of the proposed A303 dual carriageway.

The proposed amendment would effectively overturn all previous Committee decisions and effectively green light the damaging road scheme [3]. It would be extremely concerning if it was passed, as it contains many inaccuracies and misleading statements.

The question is: have UK officials gone rogue in continuing to implement Conservative roads policy, or has the Labour Government approved the intervention?

John Adams, chair of the Stonehenge Alliance and one of the 3 directors of SSWHS, said:

> *"Kenya's amendment looks like it was written by National Highways. It is full of inaccuracies and misleading statements and is in denial about the impact of the road. If passed it will undermine the credibility of the World Heritage Committee.*
>
> *"Our world heritage deserves to be treasured and protected, not traded off in dodgy backroom deals. We wonder what Kenya has been promised in return, to propose such an outrageous attack on our heritage.*

> *“The bigger question is whether these actions are the result of officials going rogue? Are they trying to continue the Conservative roads programme, or has the new Labour government green-lighted this?”*

Tom Holland, president of the Stonehenge Alliance, said:

> *“Maybe Kenya’s sudden interest in the details of transport policy in Wiltshire derives from a longstanding interest in the Stonehenge landscape? But if so, I would like to see the evidence for it. Otherwise, it is hard not to suspect the worst.”*

– ENDS –

Notes to editors:

[1] Kenya’s proposed amendment can be found here. A list of the inaccuracies and misleading statements is available from the Stonehenge Alliance.

[2] UNESCO’s World Heritage Committee is holding its 46th meeting in New Delhi, India, from 21 – 31 July, 2024

[3] The road scheme was scrutinised by 5 planning inspectors in a 6 month examination. They recommended that it should not be built and that it would cause permanent and irreparable harm to the World Heritage Site.

“Save Stonehenge!” “No

Stonehenge tunnel!” Will Government Act to save its blushes?

Protestors against the proposed £2.5bn tunnel and dual carriageway across the Stonehenge landscape gathered in the rain on Monday (July 15) outside the Royal Courts of Justice in London to mark the start of what they hope will be the final act in their campaign.

Earlier Save Stonehenge World Heritage Site (SSWHS) had opened its case in the Court of Appeal in support of its bid to overturn the Development Consent Order (DCO) for the A303 Stonehenge scheme. The then Transport Secretary Grant Shapps had approved the scheme in 2020, which was subsequently overturned by SSWHS’s legal. challenge. In 2023 Shapps’ successor, Mark Harper, once again granted the DCO, the official go-ahead for the works SSWHS has been challenging, in and out of court, ever since.

The crowdfunder launched to meet the costs of pursuing the legal action had overshot its target with days to spare. The strength of feeling was clear.

Protesters chanted for the benefit of cameras – and their wider audience.

While John Adams, one of the campaign leaders, gave interviews to BBC TV and ITV, activists from a number of groups working to support the Stonehenge Alliance stood before the entrance to the courts peacefully holding signs, placards and the famous long banner which the campaign had unfurled in support of the cause.

Afterwards a group of campaigners made their way to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport in Parliament St and onwards to the Department of Transport in Horseferry Rd to formally “hand in” at each place a petition in opposition to the Stonehenge scheme signed by over 239,000 people in 147 countries. The petition was received by department officials on behalf of ministers.

14 of us posed outside the Department for Culture, Media and Sport with a copy of the scroll hand delivered to UNESCO in Paris. It listed the 147 countries whence our 239,500

petition signatories came. But delivery of the petition was not through the front door. See below.

The Stonehenge Alliance is cautiously optimistic that the new government will look more favourably at the arguments against the road project than their Tory predecessors.

Handing in of the petition letter at DCMS was a discreet affair: via the back door. We were assured that it would be delivered to Lisa Nandy's office.

However they know the ruling of the Appeal Court will be crucial. The Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer, has already given the classic lawyer's response, saying he will wait to see the outcome of the court hearing. As Starmer knows full well, the case rests on the lawfulness of the decision not the merits of the scheme. But ministers have already hinted at a relaxation of planning rules, with growth a priority for the new government. Will the new government view the damaging road scheme as a growth opportunity (despite its appalling economic case), or an opportunity to save over £2.5bn and reinvest it in rail and other services that have reached crisis point?

The next important date in the campaign comes next week (21 –

31 July). UNESCO, which has already voiced its strong objections to the tunnel plans, could move one step closer to taking away the site's status altogether. UNESCO's World Heritage Committee is meeting in Delhi to decide whether to place Stonehenge on its List of World Heritage in Danger.

John Adams told the BBC that cancelling the project "would spare our international blushes and rebuild this country's reputation for looking after its heritage."

Delivery of the petition letter and scroll to the Department for Transport was an altogether more flamboyant ceremony.

Trio of video interviews by Tom Holland with Professor Mike Parker Pearson

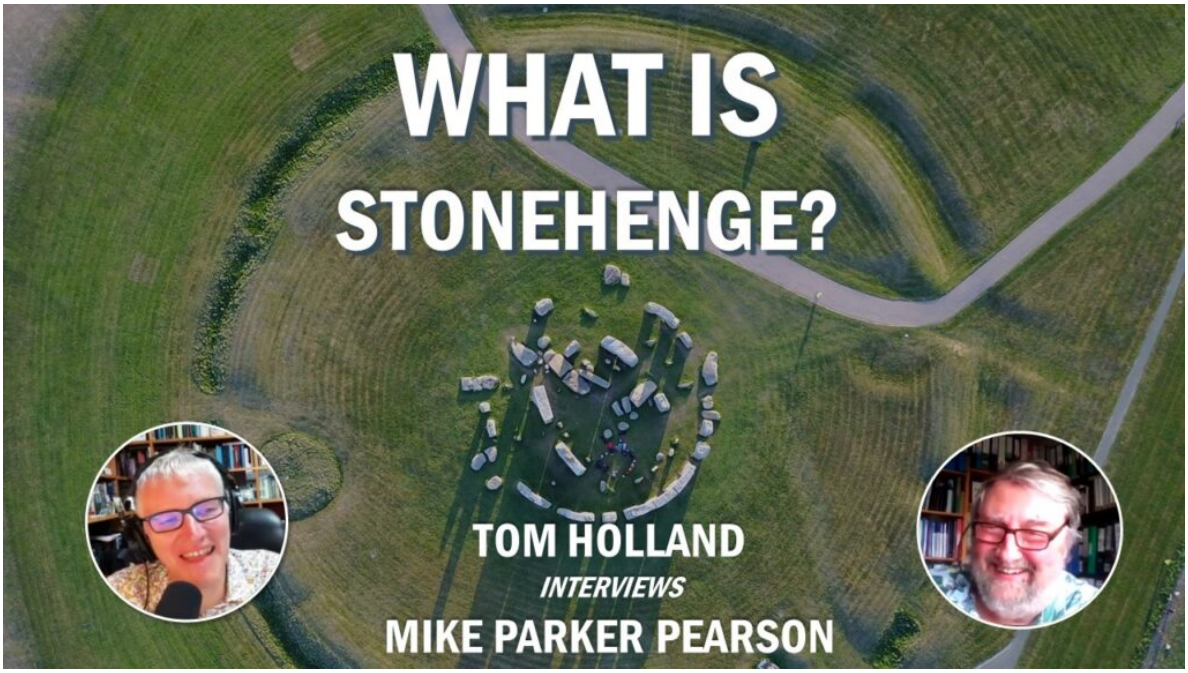
Numerous archaeologists, including many in ICOMOS who advise UNESCO, are against the A303 road proposals. One of them is Professor Mike Parker Pearson, who agreed to give us his views about the proposal.

Professor Parker Pearson is one of the world's leading experts on Stonehenge, and Professor of British Later Prehistory at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London. He led a consortium of 22 Stonehenge specialists and academics to object to the A303 Stonehenge road scheme at the Examination and subsequently during the Redetermination process.

Together with other Archaeological organisations such as Wiltshire Archaeological and Natural History Society and Council for British Archaeology, they presented evidence against the scheme. Their case was upheld by the panel of Planning Inspectors, but their recommendation against the scheme was overturned by two Transport Secretaries. The decision is being legally challenged in the Court of Appeal (15 to 17 July 2024).

1. What is Stonehenge?

Professor Parker Pearson starts off by describing the Stone Circle's unique features and possible functions.



Please click on image to view on YouTube

2. What is so special about the Stonehenge landscape?

Professor Mike Parker Pearson details the archaeological value of the landscape where the proposed Stonehenge road would cut through. Evidence is described of a huge Middle Bronze Age settlement constructed in c.1500 BC. Tom Holland probes further and helps us understand why UNESCO are so concerned that they recommend placing the WHS on the List of World Heritage in Danger. The next step would be deletion from the list of WHSs.

Please click on image to view on YouTube

3. What is wrong with the Stonehenge road scheme?

Why is Prof Mike Parker Pearson not in favour of the road scheme? Tom Holland pushes hard about mitigation. Parker Pearson explains his concerns, and that of many other archaeologists, about the potential loss of artefacts, the problem with the sheer scale of the scheme in the landscape and the need for the whole site to be protected in perpetuity for future generations.

Please click on image to view on YouTube

Message to new government from legal challengers

"So the result of the general election is clear: people have voted for change. Now they will want to see that change delivered. One opportunity for the new Labour Government to demonstrate is that it is capable of a different approach. And that would be to cancel the Stonehenge road scheme. It would help restore our international standing and save at least a handy £2.5bn in the process, which will be needed for far more important things (than moving a traffic jam a few miles down the A303).

Yet while Parliament was suspended during the election, there was no such respite for our legal team who have been busy

preparing for our hearing in just over a week's time. Thanks to the fantastic public support we are getting closer to our fundraising target.

To mark the end of the hearing we will be holding a photocall outside the Royal Courts of Justice in London, at ***1pm on Thursday, 18 July.*** *We'd love to see you there.*

Many thanks for your support,

Chris, John & Mike

The legal challengers need your support!

UNESCO raises the stakes over Stonehenge

Stonehenge Alliance Press statement: Tuesday, 25 June, 2024

The World Heritage Committee repeatedly requested that the cuttings be removed from within the inscribed property because they would have major negative impact on the overall prehistoric landscape, and compromise the physical intactness of the "highly significant ancient cultural landscape."
Photo © Stonehenge Dronescapes

The Stonehenge Alliance (SA) [1] welcomes UNESCO's recommendation that the Stonehenge and Avebury World Heritage Site be placed on the List of World Heritage in Danger due to the threat from the A303 road scheme. The recommendation is contained in a report to UNESCO's World Heritage Committee

that will be meeting in July in India [2].

The report reveals that National Highways and the UK Government have proposed changes to the scheme to try and disguise the deep cutting through the Bronze Age landscape on the western side of the site. These include 'cantilevered sides' and another 'green bridge' adding £50m to the scheme costs [3]. However, these do not appear to have addressed UNESCO's concerns.

Also revealed is the level of frustration with the UK Government's attitude towards its obligations under the World Heritage Convention. Also, with its failure to respect UNESCO's request to pause all work to allow further discussion [4]. This was seen earlier in the year when National Highways pressed ahead with closure of the A360 (to much local concern) to carry out preparatory works for the scheme [4].

All eyes will now be on the incoming (most likely) Labour Government as it will inherit the scheme and will have to decide on its future.

John Adams, chair of the Stonehenge Alliance and one of the 3 directors of SSWHS [5], said:

> *"This is a damming verdict on National Highways' plans. Its minor tweaks have quite rightly cut no ice with UNESCO. You can put lipstick on a pig, but it is still a pig. Whichever way you look at it, this scheme will be hugely damaging and should be scrapped. The money should be spent instead on improving public transport links to and around the South West. That would be the best way of reducing pressure on the A303, while still retaining the view of the Stones for passing travellers."*

Tom Holland, president of the Stonehenge Alliance:

> *"When in a hole, stop digging – and when the hole is one that*

has been dug by your political opponents, definitely stop digging. The new Government will have the perfect opportunity to reverse a road scheme that is not only ludicrously expensive, but risks huge damage to the country's international reputation. We hope that whoever comes to power next week will seize it."

– ENDS –

Contact us by email SaveStonehenge (at) gmail.com

Notes to editors:

[1] The Stonehenge Alliance supporter-organisations are: Ancient Sacred Landscape Network; Campaign to Protect Rural England; Friends of the Earth; Rescue, the British Archaeological Trust; and Transport Action Network.

[2] UNESCO's World Heritage Committee is holding its 46th meeting in New Delhi, India, from 21 – 31 July, 2024, which will be live streamed.

[3] This additional work would all be permitted within the existing DCO, which further suggests its limited impact, given the UK Government had previously stated that longer tunnels would require a new DCO. UNESCO is of this opinion (extracts from page 13, item 7B of the provisional agenda):

"The proposals for changes to the consented Scheme put forward by the State Party would have only very modest visual benefits. The two bridges would allow access across the four-lane highway, but would not minimise, or even reduce the impact on archaeological resources or the integrity of the landscape. The current main road through the landscape is undesirable, but the proposed cuttings represent a more serious and irreversible threat to the OUV of the property. Furthermore, these changes do not comply with the 'minimum' requirements previously determined by the Committee, nor do

they align with the recommendations of the 2022 Advisory mission, and they do not offer what was sought in the request for corrective measures set out in Decision 45 COM 7B.62, which provided an explicit indication that:

"the minimum change required must include an extension of the underground section of the western approach (in tunnel and/or cut-and-cover) to at least the western boundary of the property, with the western portal relocated as far west as reasonably practical, thereby reducing the length of the cut-and-cover section and minimising the extent of archaeological resources which must be removed";"

The report also states:

"Although the State Party considers that the consented Scheme provides 'best available outcome for the OUV of the property', that is within the limits that the State Party itself has set for this project."

[4] UNESCO's frustration is revealed here (top of page 13, item 7B of the provisional agenda):

"Moreover, contracts for the construction of the DCO Scheme have been awarded (subject to necessary approvals) and preliminary works are taking place in 2024, with substantial construction to proceed in 2025. While the preliminary works are outside the property and not subject to the DCO, they do not comply with the request of the Committee in Decision 45 COM 7B.62 that 'all further decisions or actions to implement the Scheme in its current approved state are halted until the Committee has reviewed the comprehensive information package of proposed modifications at its 46th session.'"

[5] Save Stonehenge World Heritage Site (SSWHS) is the organisation set up by the Stonehenge Alliance that has been granted permission to appeal the judgement on the latest

Government approval of the A303 Stonehenge Development Consent Order.