The abilities of elite capitalists to shape public policy and government decisions through the power of their philanthropic as well as business activities is not limited to the connections of wealth, power, and government on the level outlined in Michael Barker’s considered analysis of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. In fact, a cursory look at some recent goings-on in Scotland suggests that the relationship of public benefit to private funds is of a similar nature, if on a smaller scale. In the area of public planning in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, and Sir Ian Wood’s more recent plans for the city centre of Aberdeen. “The greatest golf course anywhere in the world” proposed by Donald Trump for Aberdeenshire’s Menie Estate was a not entirely welcome pitch for locals in 2006. Trump’s plan attracted dismay for its location on a Site of Special Scientific Interest, as well as its inconsistency with the existing overall planning for the area. Emphasised by Trump and also gaining local support – including on the level of residents – was the argument of economic benefit to the region in the context of a lack of planning for the coming decline in the energy sector, the main economic focus of the area, on the part of local and indeed national government. Against this background, Trump’s outline planning application went through the established decision-making channels, to be rejected by the Infrastructure Services Committee of Aberdeenshire Council with a narrow vote in November 2007. The committee chair, Martin Ford, cast the deciding vote, and has since been seen as the key personality in this rejection.

While Trump chose not to undertake the established route of appealing the planning decision, the decision over the development was called in by national government in an unprecedented manner after a series of meetings between government officials, including the First Minister, Alex Salmond, and representatives of the Trump organisation. Following a subsequent inquiry by the Local Government and Communities Committee in early 2008 into the handling of the planning application, as well as a public enquiry on the planning application itself, the development eventually received outline planning permission by the Scottish Government, where the decision rested with Scottish Ministers, in November 2008. In the scrutiny of the call-in, Salmon’s involvement was legitimised by the point that he did not intervene using his position as First Minister, but in his role as MSP for the constituency concerned, and that an application rejected at the local level can be called in by Scottish Ministers if they consider it of national importance and if this is done prior to the planning decision notice being issued by the local council.

Nonetheless, the widely communicated dismay and the subsequent removal of Ford from the Infrastructure Services Committee, and the gradual suspension of other councillors who opposed the development, left the overwhelming impression that it was Trump’s wealth and the threat of taking his business elsewhere that had allowed him to directly shape local planning by his investment, which influenced public decisions at the highest level. A key role of government would arguably be that of regulating private and economic interests in relation to other values. However, the contested claim that Trump’s project will significantly further the local economy in this case clearly overruled previous planning policy and in particular concerns such as environmental sustainability issues surrounding the political fall-out locally, in terms of the position

Notes
1. “The proposed development included two 18 hole links golf courses; a golf clubhouse; a golf academy; golf maintenance building and bunkers; a golf game area and driving range; a 450 unit resort hotel, conference centre and spa; 36 golf villas; 950 holiday homes; staff accommodation; parking areas; access roads and two future private residential housing areas for 500 houses in total”, Local Government and Communities Committee; 5th Report, 2008 (Session 3); Planning Application Processes (Menie Estate); Volume 1, pg. 1, 1 http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S3/committees/lgc/reports/08lgr08-05.htm
3. Local Government and Communities Committee; 5th Report, 2008 (Session 3); Planning Application Processes (Menie Estate); Volume 1, pg. 1, 5 http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S3/committees/lgc/reports/08lgr08-05.htm
4. The tie was moreover not between granting permission or rejecting it, but over refusing or deferring the decision; see Local Government and Communities Committee; 5th Report, 2008 (Session 3); Planning Application Processes (Menie Estate); Volume 1, pg. 1, 14 http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S3/committees/lgc/reports/08lgr08-05.htm
5. Local Government and Communities Committee; 5th Report, 2008 (Session 3); Planning Application Processes (Menie Estate); Volume 1, pg. 1, 35, 3 http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S3/committees/lgc/reports/08lgr08-05.htm
8. Local Government and Communities Committee; 5th Report, 2008 (Session 3); Planning Application Processes (Menie Estate); Volume 1, pg. 7-8, 5 http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S3/committees/lgc/reports/08lgr08-05.htm
10. See e.g. Local Government and Communities Committee; 5th Report, 2008 (Session 3); Planning Application Processes (Menie Estate); Volume 1, pg. 15 and 26, 5 http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S3/committees/lgc/reports/08lgr08-05.htm. Trump had also stated in an interview (prior to the negative decision in November 2007), that “because I am who I am... I’m going to get it.” Alex Shoumatoff, ’The Thistle and the Bee’, Vanity Fair, May 2008, http://www.vanityfair.com/culture/features/2008/05/trump200805/trump200805
12. See e.g. Gillian Bell, ’Scotchman, 2/09, http://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/Article.aspx?article_id=12434363&UserKey
15. See http://www.woodfamilytrust.org; Sir Ian Wood was...
of the opposed councillors, and the continued concerns of opponents to the scheme, in particular from an ecological perspective, continue as the development is set to take its course. Further to a twist of events, Aberdeen City Council are now ‘not ruling out’ compulsory purchase orders to acquire land for Trump’s scheme with public funds.

Emerging just before the favourable decision in the Trump case, Sir Ian Wood intervention in Aberdeen City’s public planning was in many ways analogous to Trump’s more widely reported efforts. In this case, Wood – a local businessman who as founder of the Wood Group is now one of the richest individuals in Scotland, and has created his own charitable foundation, The Wood Family Trust – offered the city £50 million towards the development of a square in the current location of a city centre park, a scheme he has championed in previous incarnations for decades. Thus, an earlier version of the scheme formed part of ‘Aberdeen Beyond 2000’, a report in 1987 by “a self-appointed committee of local interests, including Wood, dominated by the business sector”, including oil corporations, construction, local businesses, financial institutions, local government representation, as well as the University of Aberdeen and local media. As pointed out in a critical review of this report in 1990 by Mike Wade, ‘The Aberdeen Beyond 2000 group and plans [ran] contrary to...[the] democratically accountable planning system”, and the report “undermines the position of the local authorities involved”, constituting effectively “an attempt by unelected and unaccountable interests to appropriate those [democratic planning] functions.”

In a return to ‘Beyond 2000 of 1987’, the current scheme was first publicly proposed in the form of a press conference Wood gave in Aberdeen in November 2008 in the company of Alex Salmond, in his function of First Minister on this occasion. While the details of the scheme are still unknown, Wood’s offer has, for the time being, halted a previously granted planning application for the same site for a new contemporary art centre proposed by Peacock Visual Arts.

Since Wood’s donation would have to be more than matched by public funds – anything approaching actual cost is at this point conjecture, although the figure most recently reported is £140 million – his generosity is, in effect, influencing not only public planning but also expenditure. Thus, local citizens will have contributed to an as yet not clearly communicated scheme they have, so far, have had little if any opportunity to influence and which does not appear in any way a response to politically identified priorities, be they in terms of public provision at large or more specifically in public planning. Wood’s ambitions are, if his plan is implemented, set to reconfigure a central, if currently little used, public space through an initiative stemming not from any tangible public interest but from his private wealth. In this context it is notable that the development of his scheme towards planning permission and its ultimate realisation is steered by local private-public body Aberdeen City and Shire Economic Forum (ASCEF) and has most recently been propped up by Scottish Enterprise, who, in another twist and turn of events, also support the art centre scheme.