

# How public land worth £1bn simply disappeared

MORE than £1 billion of land and assets belonging to the public have been lost due to centuries of mismanagement and corruption, the Scottish parliament will hear this week.

Land experts say common good assets - property historically owned by the taxpayer and managed by local authority custodians - have been misappropriated or even stolen.

Holyrood's local government and transport committee will hear evidence from leading land reformer Andy Wightman that common good assets should now be safeguarded for the benefit of future generations.

As part of its investigation, the committee will hear how the Princes Mall shopping centre in Edinburgh - currently owned by Rangers tycoon David Murray - was transferred out of the common good fund by councillors in 1982. If it had remained in the fund, it is claimed it could have earned millions of pounds in rent and be worth about £20 million as a capital asset.

MSPs will also look at the black hole in the finances of the Lanarkshire town of Hamilton, where some £50 million is missing from the common good account as a result of an initiative that started under the then leadership of Finance Minister Tom McCabe.

Mr Wightman and accountant James Perman last year published a report on common good land in Scotland which revealed widespread concerns over the

By **Marcello Mega**

management of common good assets across Scotland.

In their report, they wrote: 'The history of the common good over the centuries has been a history of wise stewardship followed by corruption, nepotism, cronyism and criminality.'

'Today the situation is characterised by ignorance, bad record-keeping, impoverished funds, confusion and a continuing dose of cronyism, nepotism and evidence of occasional criminality.'

They recommended a public register of assets, a statutory right for communities to take back title and ownership of common good funds, an independent review of all local authority property sales and an obligation on councils to pay a market rent for the use of common good property.

The Holyrood committee will be asked on Tuesday by petitioners to prevent the further sale of such assets for development.

The committee will also hear from local authorities, including Edinburgh and South Lanarkshire, who have been asked to explain their use of common good assets.

Mr Wightman is currently in Ethiopia but will give evidence to the committee by live video-link from Addis Ababa.

He will urge the committee to take action over missing assets of more than £1 billion and the 'illegal appropriation' of common good assets.