

The International Polar Foundation responds to the latest accusations in the press

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The International Polar Foundation responds to the latest allegations against it and clarifies misconceptions about its activities related to the flagship project of the Foundation for Belgium on the international stage, the world's first "zero emission" polar research station, the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica.

The Princess Elisabeth Antarctic research station: What does the Belgian State want?

The Board of Directors of the International Polar Foundation has with great surprise learnt from the Belgian press of the initiative that Elke Sleurs, the Belgian Secretary of State in charge of Federal Science Policy, has taken with the aim of unilaterally modifying the Royal Decree governing the management of the Princess Elisabeth Antarctic research station. *The PEA project was, from the outset, meant to be a close cooperation between the public and private sectors with the goal of supporting polar research in a region of Antarctica with historical links to Belgium, and where a new research station was manifestly needed.*

The proposal of the Secretary of State seeks to appoint a new Strategic Council for the Belgian Polar Secretariat, and one which is to be made up only of members from the public sector. This move ousting the private sector partners is in direct opposition to the bilateral accords which underly the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica project from the very beginning. The Secretary of State's proposition was introduced on the very day on which the Belgian courts ruled against the Belgian State for the second time in this unfortunate affair. The order of the Court of First Instance in Brussels ruled on 10th July that the Belgian State had to appoint members from the private sector of the Strategic Council within a fortnight, or else give sound reasons for not complying.

The Council of Ministers, it transpires, proceeded to provisionally approve the proposal (to amend the law) despite the fact that no contact was established between the cabinet of Secretary Sleurs and the IPF to try to resolve their differences. This is despite her cabinet writing the following to the IPF on the 6th of March: *"Please allow me to congratulate you on a successful 2014-2015 [Antarctic] campaign. The State Secretary of Science Policy would be happy to meet with you in order to better understand the situation [in Antarctica]. She fully understands the challenges one faces in such a [polar] campaign, including the financial challenges. Know that the meeting will also serve to prepare a communication to the general public so that the positive image of the station can help keep the station [project] going."*

For many years, the public-private partnership of the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica project has been asphyxiated politically, administratively, and financially by the public sector.

Of what does the Belgian State accuse the International Polar Foundation?

A conflict of interest?

There is manifestly no conflict of interest. The Princess Elisabeth Antarctica research station was constructed at the initiative of the International Polar Foundation, and funded mostly with money from the private sector (16 million Euros). As a public private partnership, this semi-autonomous public service is governed by conventions, which define the financing, management and operation of the Princess Elisabeth station via the Belgian Polar Secretariat. While the former Director of the Belgian Federal Science Policy (BELSPO) first raised his objections to this form of management on the 18th of May 2011, the Minister of Science Policy and the Council of State reassured him, confirming the legality of the Belgian Polar Secretariat decision making bodies: "The particular position that the latter (sic) (the International Polar Foundation) and its president, Mr Alain Hubert, holds in the Belgian Polar Secretariat has come about in a perfectly legal manner." (*Letter of Minister of Science Policy Sabine Laruelle addressed to the president of BELSPO at that time, Phillippe Mettens, dated 15 July 2011*).

Financial Manipulations?

All accounting documents related to the operations of the station were sent to the appropriate authorities on time. The unilateral reports of the Financial Inspector were never forwarded to the IPF. We can testify to the fact that all expenses related to the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica research station conform to the budgets adopted each year by the Strategic Council of the Belgian Polar Secretariat. The International Polar Foundation has always respected all instructions from the financial inspector regarding public procurement regulations. All of our accounting documents are transparent to Belgian authorities. All invoices are systematically validated and certified by an external auditor.

Using “affiliated companies” for self-enrichment?

The “affiliated companies” are founding partners of the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica station project, whereas the Belgian State is not. It has been public knowledge from the outset that Alain Hubert, a private citizen, has served as non-remunerated President of the Strategic Council of the Belgian Polar Secretariat (a body in which he had no extraordinary powers, but was simply one of 12 voting Council members) while also serving as Chairman of the Board of Directors of the International Polar Foundation. This particular configuration was never questioned by the Government of the time.

With regard to the teams working at the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica station (referred to as “affiliated companies”): they are historical partners from whom the International Polar Foundation has sought expertise in technical and polar-related matters. These partners contributed to the construction of the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica station (2007-2009), on a voluntary basis. Since the station became operational in 2009, these partner individuals and organisations have contributed to the operation of the station and have been remunerated for their services at fair market value. All contracts with these companies have been established with full transparency, exclusively for the benefit of the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica station. The “affiliated companies” include Polaris Centre asbl, a not-for-profit organisation within the International Polar Foundation group, tasked with managing HQ operations between Belgium and Antarctica; a specialised carpentry company handling the construction and maintenance of the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica station; a research and development company, which designs technical equipment for use in extreme conditions as well as specialised shoes for use in professional polar activities.

An external audit conducted by Ernst & Young and ordered by the Secretary of State of the time, as well as successive reports of international Antarctic Treaty inspections made by partner countries confirmed that operational costs of the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica station were significantly lower than those of other stations in Antarctica of similar size. Moreover, partner countries have often commented on the high quality of the logistical support scientists receive.

Budgetary overruns?

Since the beginning of our collaboration with the Belgian State, whenever a budget is exceeded, the extra is always covered by the International Polar Foundation, with the help of private sponsors. Furthermore, sponsorship from the private sector has been needed to allow the International Polar foundation to ensure pre-financing obligations for seasons carried out at the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica station, and to address the shortfall which resulted from the Belgian State's late payment of money owed, as well as interest on pre-financing each season. With regard to late payments, on 8 May 2015, the Court of First Instance in Brussels issued a ruling condemning the Belgian State to pay

outstanding invoices for sums indisputably owed to the International Polar Foundation. The Belgian State owes the International Polar Foundation a cumulated sum of 2,308,142 Euros in unpaid invoices. To date, the Belgian State has not respected this ruling.

The State Secretary's allusion to a “bankruptcy” of the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica station?

This strange notion concerning the “bankruptcy” of the station is part of the strategy of persuasion that the Secretary of State has developed. When the Belgian State refuses to honour its debt to the International Polar Foundation, and thus indirectly to the Foundation's subcontracted service providers, it becomes necessary to have a clear look at the responsibilities of each party.

The only failure related to the Princess Elisabeth Antarctica station project comes from the partnership with the Belgian public sector, which has not respected its agreements and obligations as a partner in the station project.

In spite of the non-respect of the conventions signed by the Belgian State, the International Polar Foundation (IPF) would like to express, via this communication, its firm determination to continue its activities in Antarctica, with its only objective being to ensure the continued use of the station as a tool to serve scientific research. As the first zero carbon emission research station in Antarctica, the Princess Elisabeth station is a prototype for sustainable living recognised around the world.

It has come about as an initiative of the International Polar Foundation and its private-sector partners, and it is a flagship project for Belgium on the international stage.

-The Board of Directors of the International Polar Foundation

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