

Letter from Scotland



I may be a
fat cat but
I've not
done
anything
wrong.

So, the fat cats are outed again. The politicians and bankers – among them some Scots, to our shame – have this week proved themselves to be as gloriously out of touch as the participants at the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. Sir Malcom Rifkind, until this week a much respected former cabinet minister, thought himself "entitled" to more than his MP's salary of £67,000 a year and was caught on camera apparently offering his services as a lobbyist to a fictitious Chinese company.

It was cheeky sting by the Daily Telegraph and Channel 4. It also snared another former foreign secretary Labour's Jack Straw, so it wasn't particularly biased against the Tories or the Scots. But it showed us that "sleaze" still flows quite freely through the drains at Westminster, despite the MPs expenses scandal five years ago. They just don't get it, do they?

Not to be outdone, The Royal Bank of Scotland announced this week that it is to pay out bonuses to its staff worth £421m, despite the fact that the bank turned in a loss of £3.5bn in 2014. The bonuses were dismissed as a "distraction" from the overall improvement in the bank's performance (the loss in 2013 was £9bn) by Ross McEwan, the New Zealand farmer brought in to turn the bank around. He himself has waved his bonus of £1m – but don't worry on his behalf, his basic salary is £2.7m a year !

Just what makes men like Sir Malcolm and Jack Straw and Mr McEwan – indeed all honourable MPs and senior bankers – lose touch with reality when they enter the Bermuda Triangle of Westminster, the City of London and the leafy suburbs of Knightsbridge and Islington ? Some people say it's power that corrupts, but it's more likely to be money. £67,000 a year is a world away from the average man's £26,000.

It leads MPs to the quaint belief that to keep in touch with the outside world they must take on highly-paid directorships or lobbying jobs or demand lecture fees of £5,000 a day. It never occurs to them that they might see more accurately how the lower classes live if they were to spend a day volunteering at a food bank, or working as a plumber's mate, or a care assistant.

It makes you wonder how people living in the rarefied atmosphere of Westminster and the City can make sensible decisions on large and real issues like business investment, "austerity", welfare cuts, NHS reforms, Trident, wars in far-away places. Perhaps we ordinary folk should help them out on May 7th.

Here in Scotland our own political class have been presented with difficult issues of their own this week. NHS "bed-blocking" has continued to make news. The cost of returning Prestwick Airport to private ownership, after its rescue by the government, has doubled to over £40m. And there are fears that the Longannet power station – which produces a quarter of Scotland's electricity – will have to close next year because of high transmission charges by the national grid.

Meanwhile the renewables industry is celebrating the award of 11 contracts by the Department of Energy for wind farms in Scotland to produce electricity for the national grid. They include projects in the Highlands, Morayshire and Dumfries and Galloway and the huge 75-turbine wind farm Neart na Gaoithe (strength of the wind) off the Firth of Forth.

Happily someone else is thinking about other long-term solutions to our energy crisis. Professor Martin Tangney of Napier University says part of the answer lies in Scotch whisky ! His research centre has produced a fuel called "biobutanol" from the waste products of the distilling industry. Apparently 90 per cent of the raw materials used to make whisky are thrown away but a spin-off company from Napier, called Celtic Renewables, has revised a 100-year old recipe to produce oil from biological material.

Another Celtic made our spirits soar last week when they held Inter-Milan to a 3-3 draw at home in Glasgow. This week however, at the return match in the San Siro stadium in Milan, they were beaten 1-nil. But they held out valiantly till the second last minute, despite having a man sent off in the first half.

I was heartened see a picture of the Dandie Dinmonts visiting Sir Walter Scott's house in the Borders this week. There are only 300 of them left in the world, we were told. I happen to know about these wee dogs because I live in Dinmont Drive on the Walter Scott estate in Edinburgh where every street is named after a place or character in Scott's novels. Dandie Dinmont is a large and worthy farmer in "Guy Mannering" who breeds terriers, calling them all either "Pepper" or "Mustard". "They're fell chieles at the vermin," he boasts. And I'll bet they could catch a fat cat or two !