

Letter from Scotland

Like the Queen of the Celts, Boudica, Nicola Sturgeon rode her chariot into the heart of the establishment in London on Wednesday and told the posh boys in blue suits that their austerity programme wasn't working. "It's morally unjustifiable and economically unsustainable," she lectured. The budget deficit, she went on, is not the cause of our problems, it's a symptom of a badly managed economy.

Her argument is that government debt is rising (by £99bn last year) because the tax-take is low and the welfare bill is increasing. And that's because more people are being pushed into poverty, with low wages and only part-time work. Prosperity and social justice (equality) go hand in hand is her argument. And in my view, she's quite right.

☒ Ms Sturgeon went on to outline her plan for recovery – increase government spending by £180bn over the next five years (an increase of 0.5 per cent) and reverse the cuts in welfare and the public services. Presumably this would be paid for by the increase in tax revenue that would result, if we follow her Keynesian logic.

It's a clever tactic because it puts the SNP to the left of the Labour Party (which supported another £30 bn of austerity cuts in a vote in the Commons last month) and gives the nationalists another lever in any negotiations after the general election in May. It also rides the wave of anti-austerity protests across Europe which saw the left-wing Syriza Party win power in Greece and has put Podemos in front in the opinion polls in Spain.

As evidence of her willingness to continue spending on public services, Ms Sturgeon went to a school in Dundee earlier in the week to announce £100m over the next four years for schools in deprived areas to help them close the "attainment

gap". But alas, things did not go so well for her when trade unionists turned up outside local council budget-setting meetings on Thursday to protest against council cuts. They argued that the council tax freeze, which the SNP government has imposed since 2007, is making the Westminster government's austerity cuts even worse.

It's also, they said, against the SNP's promise of more autonomy for local councils. This tied in fortuitously with a Labour Party announcement on Monday that it wants "devo-max" for Scotland's cities. The party leader Jim Murphy said: "I want to turn our twin cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow into the economic powerhouse they should be, an economic hub to rival London." It's a large ambition and a plan that has been tried before. But this time Labour is talking about devolving a part of income tax and allowing councils to raise other taxes, such as a tourist charge or a congestion charge.

Scotland lags behind many countries in Europe when it comes to local autonomy. Personally, I'd like to see local councils take charge of the health service, colleges and universities, fire and police, water, pollution control etc. And I'd like to see more independent councils in our larger towns and islands. Simply because I think local people would do a better job.

There might, for instance, be an end to the high-salary/bonus culture which we learnt this week still very much exists in the national quangos and the larger councils. A "Scotsman" newspaper investigation found that Glasgow University, for example, paid out £148,000 in bonuses last year, NHS Tayside paid out £3.7m, Edinburgh council £1.7m, and even Audit Scotland, which is supposed to be keeping an eye on extravagant spending, paid out £133,000 in bonuses.

But if you want to get away from all this materialist comfort, you can apply to the latest Shackleton expedition. In the words of the original 1915 newspaper advertisement it promises "a hazardous journey, small wages, bitter cold...but honour in

the case of success.”

Polar explorer Charlie Paton, from Aberdeen, is inviting applications from members of the public to be part of his team to complete Ernest Shackleton’s attempt to cross the Antarctic from coast to coast, via the South Pole, starting in September this year. The final team member, he says, could be a man or woman. But he or she must be able to tow a sledge weighing 100kg for a hundred days in temperatures as low as minus 60C and also have compassion and a sense of humour, virtues we might need as we watch the politicians pull their sledges of election offers towards that other Poll on May 7th.

Photo courtesy of The Scottish Parliament.