

Letter from Scotland



More jobs but is the economy working ?

We are all getting mightily excited about the latest fall in unemployment. It's down to 5.4 per cent, the lowest level since the financial crash in 2008. But what gets a much less excitable mention is that youth unemployment is still at a shockingly high 16.4 per cent. It's clear that the younger generation has paid the heaviest price for the bankers' Great Recession.

In Scotland we have 53,000 young people (under 25s) who are not in employment, education or training. It's not as bad as in some European countries like Spain (51 per cent), Greece (50 per cent), Italy (42 per cent), or even the rest of the UK (17 per cent). But it's worse than in better organised countries like Germany (7 per cent) and the Netherlands (10 per cent).

So, a whole underclass of young people are starting off in life with no job – let alone a career – piles of debt, no house because of high rents and the bankers' high deposit rules on house purchase, and an understandable disillusionment with politics and "the system." The politicians, meanwhile, ignore the young (because they don't vote) and promise older people a triple lock on their pensions, free bus passes, winter fuel allowances, more spending on home care and the NHS and more spending on their young grandchildren.

This would be all very well if the 20 somethings could work their way out of their quagmire but the private sector is not producing the permanent, well-paying jobs that these young people require. And the public sector is only half way through the current round of blood-letting we call "austerity." The

same is true across much of Europe, and indeed the Arab world, and it is the great challenge facing the capitalist system.

Admittedly this week's employment figures are all moving in the right direction. General unemployment is back to pre-recession levels, more young people are in work and more women are getting back to work. But a lot of the work on offer is part-time (around 25 per cent) and much of it is on low-wages. Real incomes have been held back for the last seven years while the cost of child-care has soared at a rate of 5 per cent a year.

The difficulty of finding a nursery place these days was an issue raised at First Minister's Questions at Holyrood this week. Labour's Kezia Dugdale said many local councils were failing to provide the 600 hours of free childcare the SNP government promised last year. The fault, said Nicola Sturgeon, lay with Labour-controlled councils which were using the money for other things. But she admitted that more childcare places were needed, which is why the SNP wanted to increase it to 1,149 hours a year, or 30 hours a week, if it wins the next Scottish election.

Directly after question time, the Chief Constable Sir Stephen House found himself in the dock in front of the Parliament's Justice Committee answering awkward questions about trust in the police. It follows a series of u-turns and s-turns over arming the police and stop-and-search operations. It emerged during the meeting that the police had lost 20,000 records of stop-and-search incidents because of a computer error.

Another issue Sir Stephen is thinking hard about is the sale of alcohol inside football grounds. The Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy is organising a summit meeting of football clubs at Hampden to gather support for his new policy of allowing alcohol to be sold during football matches.

"If you can have a beer at a rugby match or at a football

stadium in England, then why not in Scotland ?” he’s asking. The SNP’s health secretary Shona Robison gave him the answer: “I am not convinced we have seen the eradication of football related violence. In fact I think we see it far too much.” There were, for instance, 37 arrests at the Rangers/Celtic match on 1st February. On Thursday night at Celtic Park, no amount of alcohol could replace the inebriating result 3-3, against the mighty Italians from Inter-Milan.

Out at sea, the crew of the container ship the Lysblick Seaways couldn’t believe their eyes when they saw the rocks of Ardnamurchan Point sudden loom up before them. Their 400ft vessel ran aground in the early hours of Wednesday morning and stuck fast on the rocks. Diesel oil began to leak from her tanks and locals began to question the UK government’s decision to cut the number of emergency tugs on standby around the Scottish coast to just one.

Finally, there is disturbing news for hedgehogs this week. Scottish Natural Heritage is to resume its “translocation” operations on South Uist in the Outer Hebrides. Over the next ten years, thousands of these sweet but politically prickly animals will be translocated to the mainland to try to preserve the eggs and young fledglings of the important populations of wader birds on South Uist and neighbouring islands.

South Uist is not the natural home of hedgehogs. They were introduced by a keen gardener in 1974 in a misguided attempt to stop the slugs and snails attacking his plants. The result has been devastation of the wader birds, the spending of millions of pounds of taxpayers money, division among the conservation fraternity and the near meltdown of Scottish Natural Heritage.

When the agency first tried to control the hedgehogs, back in 2004, some 700 were “culled” and this caused a cry from the heart from animal lovers, including the British Hedgehog

Preservation Society.

By 2007, the cull had been abandoned and instead some 1600 hedgehogs were translocated to mainland sites, with the aid of the Hedgehog Preservation Society and other conservation groups. But the dunlin, ringed plover, redshanks, snipe, lapwing and oystercatchers are still in decline and the hedgehogs are being blamed again. So now, at a cost of £5m, there's to be another attempt at eradication in order to save these birds and "the wider tourism product in the Outer Hebrides."

What would Mrs Tiggywinkle say ?