

Letter from Scotland



A haunted Halloween

'Tis the season to be wary of ghosts and spectres. And not just if you are on your way to a Halloween party or you are a 007 secret agent. It is also useful advice if you are a steel worker or a student or former college principal or a police officer or a member of the Labour Party at your conference in Perth. All have been given reason to be very afraid of the news this week.

But first, a real and present tragedy. As I write, pupils, teachers and parents at Cults Academy in Aberdeen are gathering for a candle-lit vigil in the local church to mourn the loss of a 16 year old pupil Bailey Gwynne. He died after being stabbed in the school at lunchtime on Wednesday. It's not clear what happened but another 16 year-old boy has been charged in connection with the incident. So many questions are hanging in the air. But such are the shock waves that no one can yet answer them.

Question time in The Scottish Parliament began with party leaders expressing their sympathy for Bailey's family and for the whole community in Cults. But for them also it was too early to reach possible conclusions or draw lessons. Instead they debated the worrying issue of student debt. It emerged this week that students from poorer backgrounds are leaving university with an average debt burden of £24,000, despite government grants. In fact, the total given in grants and bursaries has fallen by half in the last five years.

The opposition parties have also been asking awkward questions about the government's supervision of fat-cat pay-offs in the merger of Scotland's further education colleges. For example, the principal of Coatbridge College, John Doyle, whose annual

salary was £116,000, was given a 30-month pay-off when he lost his job, giving him a total severance package of £304,000. It's been pointed out that most council workers get just three months' pay when they are laid off. MSPs have begun an inquiry, as well they might.

None of this, of course, has damaged the SNP in its onward march towards victory in the Scottish elections in May. Labour is still 30 points behind in the opinion polls as the party gathers this weekend for its Scottish conference in Perth. It's still haunted by its failure to win any but a single seat in the UK election last May and its loss of the last two general elections in Scotland. Its leaders are also still coming to terms with what they see as the spectre of "Corbynism", the fear that by moving to the left they will be out of power for a generation.

Everyone agrees Labour's new leader in Scotland, Kezia Dugdale, faces what's politely called "a challenge". She has yet to spell out what a "federal" Labour Party means, all she has said so far is that she will be in charge of policy and personnel in Scotland and no longer will the Scottish Labour Party be a "branch office" of the UK party. The first test of the new Caledonia First approach may come on Sunday when the issue of Trident nuclear weapons could be put on the agenda by delegates. In that case, the conference is likely to vote for unilateral disarmament, putting it at odds with the official UK Labour policy. We will then have a unilateralist leading a multilateralist party in England and a multilateralist leading a unilateralist party in Scotland. I wish Gilbert and Sullivan were still around !

Another issue lying beneath the surface, so to speak, is "austerity"...how much should Labour have of it ? The cuts to public services came into sharp focus this week with news that the new unitary police force in Scotland is facing a £25m shortfall. Hardly a week goes by without similar financial strains showing in other services, like health and education.

Maybe it's time politicians bit the bullet and accepted that taxes have to go up.

On Thursday yet another ghost came back to haunt us. One of those grim "task forces" was set up to save another piece of Scotland's industrial soul. Two of our great steel-rolling mills in Lanarkshire, Dalzell and Clydebridge, have been put up for sale by their Indian owners Tata. Over 270 jobs are at risk. It's not going to be easy to save them, with the oil industry in the doldrums and the world market swamped with cheap steel from China.

The government has asked its agency Transport Scotland to see if it can bring forward any of its steel-intensive projects. The irony is that the agency is just completing its new bridge over the River Forth with steel imported from China.

But at least we can battle against the spectre from the Far East in one unlikely sphere...gymnastics. At the world championships in Glasgow, the British men's team beat China to the silver medal and came within half a point of beating the mighty men of Japan.