

Letter from Scotland



Saving Inch House

I arrived home from a visit to South Britain to find a petition posted through my door inviting me to "Save Inch House." This is my local community centre, a 17th century manor house which has fallen on hard times. It stands proudly in Inch Park in the shadow of Arthur's Seat and Craigmillar Castle. Its future is the story of our times.....council cuts, possible community ownership, re-development.

Apparently the building is in need of £1 million worth of repairs. Stonework has already begun to fall to the ground and parts of the structure have been sealed off.

The local newspaper screams defiance. "Save our Centre" it says on the front page. This is the place, after all, where the lead singer of "Garbage" Shirley Manson, and many a lesser star, first discovered the world of music in its practice rooms. Over 20,000 people use the centre each year in dozens of bands and clubs.

So what should happen to a building like Inch House ? Should the council stump up the £1m and carry on as usual ? Should it be taken over by a community trust ? Should it be sold to a private developer ? And can any of these solutions be viable in the long term ? Or should it lose its A-listed protection and be knocked down as not fit for modern purposes ?

I guess there are many community centres in Scotland which face the same list of awkward questions. The fashion is for the solution to be found in the local community. The Scottish Government's Community Empowerment Act foresees local people taking over their communal assets and running them for themselves. But I wonder if we will hear any more of this Act

than we've heard recently of David Cameron's "Big Society."

Aren't the local councils we've already got supposed to be the Big Society ?

There are indeed signs of this happening, despite the counter-current of George Osborne's cuts. This week Scottish councils take over joint responsibility with the NHS for "social care", making sure that more patients are looked after at home.

During the election campaign, all the parties say they want more powers devolved from Holyrood and they are prepared to see tax money going that way.

It seems to me that this is the best way to build communities, rather than relying on a few activists taking on the burdens of running a community trust. Saving our councils is the way to save the likes of Inch House.