

Letter from Scotland



Going to the Match by L. S.
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The first rebellion against the new SNP government looks like being a spat about the surprising and shameful issue of sectarianism at football matches.

In 2012 the SNP used its majority at Holyrood to force through the Offensive Behaviour at Football Act which makes “offensive singing or chanting” at public football matches a criminal offence with punishments ranging from a £40 fine to 5 years in prison.

All the opposition parties – who now have a majority – voted against what they said was an over-reaction to a particularly disgraceful outbreak of sectarian chanting and general abuse at a Celtic-Rangers match in March 2011. Such behaviour, they say, could easily be dealt with under the centuries old catch-all offence of “breach of the peace”.

Football fans have complained that it’s not clear which songs and which chants are being outlawed and they suspect the police may interpret the law differently on different terraces. One Dundee Sheriff who found himself struggling to pass judgement on an offender, declared that the law was so “horribly drafted” it amounted to “mince”.

But the SNP is sticking to the line that something has to be done to end Scotland’s “shame”, the Protestant versus Catholic sectarianism that still rears its head from time to time at, or around, big football matches. It says sectarian offences have dropped 28 per cent since the Act came into force. It rejects wilder claims that the Act puts a limit on free speech or prevents people commenting on or mocking religious beliefs.

But that hasn't stopped Labour, Conservative, Green and Liberal Democrats from ganging up to support the Labour MSP James Kelly in his attempt to have the Act repealed. It's a curious issue on which to launch their first attack on the new government. You would think they might have something to say about the economy, with unemployment up to 6.2 per cent and manufacturing and exports in the doldrums.

Or they might challenge the newly installed government on how it will pay for its long list of election promises, including doubling early years education, £100m for closing the attainment gap in schools, £500m more for the NHS, £150m new spending on mental health, £300m on social welfare, £100m on police and £3bn on new houses. All this at a time when tax revenues are falling and the Chancellor in London is still only half way through his austerity programme.



The unfortunate man who has to balance the books is the young Derek Mackay, the new Finance Secretary. He takes over from John Swinney who has been moved to the education department in Nicola Sturgeon's post-election cabinet reshuffle. To put such a senior figure in charge of education is a signal that the Ms Sturgeon is serious about her pledge to make education her top priority.

A third minister to feel sorry for is Roseanna Cunningham. She takes over as Environment Secretary which includes the farming brief and the disastrous new computer system which is supposed to be paying out European Union agriculture subsidies.

The Auditor General published a report this week saying the system is littered with "multiple failures". It stretches even my credibility to learn that a computer system can cost £174m and still not work. You would think a few clerks with quill-tip pens could have managed to hand out £400m to 20,000 farmers over a growing season. Even now, only 80 per cent of

farmers have received the payments they were due last year.



The government's reputation was restored, at least in the Firth of Clyde and the Western Isles, when it announced that state-owned Caledonian MacBrayne had retained its contract to run the ferry services to 24 islands off the west coast. It was forced into a bidding war with the private firm Serco under European Union competition rules. The new Transport Minister Humza Yousaf was thus able to turn a workers' protest outside the Scottish Parliament into a celebration. The new eight-year contract is worth £900m and includes a target of increasing passenger traffic by 10 per cent.

Finally, back to sport and a previous century. The prestigious East Lothian golf club, Muirfield, has decided to keep its policy of "No lady members." The "modern" men in the club failed to win the required two-thirds majority to change the rules.

Almost immediately, the governing body of golf, The Royal and Ancient Golf Club at St Andrews, issued a manly statement saying if Muirfield didn't allow lady members, it would no longer be considered a suitable venue for the Open Championship. And, by the way, if Royal Troon in Ayrshire, didn't join the 21st century and allow women to be members, it too would not be considered for any future Opens.

The balls now lie in Troon and Muirfield's bunkers. It seems that sport is not so much harmless fun after all.