

Letter from Scotland



Is Keir Hardie's
party over ?

Keir Hardie would be turning in his grave – if he had one – to see his Labour Party in its stalemated condition today. Which way would he have voted if he was one of the 640,000 current members of the party ? In many ways, he resembles Jeremy Corbyn, and not just in bearded looks and working-class attire. He was a pacifist, a believer in equality and the big state, and a modest man of the people.

But Hardie had two qualities Corbyn lacks...charisma and flexibility. Charisma is not essential in a party leader, think of Clement Attlee or Harold Wilson or Gordon Brown, or indeed Alex Douglas Home or John Major or Theresa May. But flexibility ? Well, all leaders have to accommodate their party colleagues and this, apparently, Jeremy has not been able to do. Though, to an outsider like me, I cannot see what he has done that's so very wrong. Labour's low rating in the opinion polls has more to do with its MPs squabbling among themselves than it has with Jeremy Corbyn's personal performance.

And again this mystified outsider cannot decide if the leadership contest was about personalities or policy. Owen Smith claims to share many of Corbyn's left wing beliefs, though most of his supporters are broadly New Labour. There is obviously a fundamental divide between New Labour social democrats and the out-and-out socialism of the Cobynistas.

This confusion and infighting at Westminster extends into the Labour Party in Scotland. The leader here, Kezia Dugdale, supported Owen Smith while her deputy, Alex Rowley, supported Jeremy Corbyn. So, with the new devolved powers given this

week to the Scottish Party, it will be interesting to see which side it will come down on when the dust from the Westminster contest settles. If it ever does.

Meanwhile, the woman “of independent mind looks and laughs at a’ that.” Nicola Sturgeon has run away with many of Labour’s traditional supporters and left us with in a strange political world in which there is no real opposition to the governing party at Westminster and no real opposition party to the governing party at Holyrood. And the vacuum left by Labour was nowhere more obvious than in the referendum on the European Union.

So when Kezia Dugdale pressed her voting button at Holyrood on Thursday it failed to function, an ironic symbol of Labour’s current ineffectiveness. Earlier she’d stood up to confront Nicola Sturgeon at first minister’s question time to complain that the SNP were passing on the Tory cuts but they were cuts Labour had failed to stop at Westminster.

To be fair, she went further, pointing out that while the overall Scottish budget had been cut by 5 per cent over the last five years, the SNP had cut local government spending by 11 per cent and this had left schools and care services struggling. She cited a report from the Accounts Commission which estimated that an extra £667m would be needed each year by 2020 to keep pace with demand for home care services alone.

Ms Sturgeon replied that she was mitigating the cuts by targeting money on schools in deprived areas and switching some health spending towards care in the community.

Away from politics, a shocking report came out mid-week showing how little progress is being made in improving Scotland’s health. The Household Survey of 6,000 adults and children revealed that 65 per cent of adults are overweight and 28 per cent of children are overweight. The average child is eating less than 3 portions of fruit and vegetables a day, compared to the recommended 5, and a quarter of all children

are not taking the recommended 75 minutes of vigorous exercise a week.

But at least children will soon be freed from having to sit so many "assessments" at school. The education secretary John Swinney has announced that all unit assessments in National 5 and Higher courses will be scrapped from 2019. Results will be determined on exams and course work only. Mr Swinney was facing a revolt from teachers who said the extra workload was just not worth it. A victory, I think, for common sense.

Finally, Hibernian Football Club are mourning the death of their oldest fan and a remarkable Scot. Sam Martinez died at the age of 106. He was born in the Central American state of Belize and came to Britain in 1942 as a volunteer lumberjack to help with the war effort. He stayed on to work as a cook in British Honduras House in Edinburgh and eventually got a job in a paper mill in Balerno, walking the 8 miles every day to save his bus fare.

He married a Scottish girl and raised a family of six children. When the mill closed down in 1960, he got a job as a street cleaner. In the 1970s the family moved to Wester Hailes where he worked in a bakery and then a butchers shop, as well as doing voluntary work in the Dove Centre, until he was 94. Shortly after his arrival in Edinburgh, nearly 75 years ago, a stranger gave him a spare ticket for a Hibs match and he has been a loyal supporter ever since.

Thankfully, he lived to see the club win the Scottish Cup in May this year. A suitable end to his long journey.