

Letter from Scotland



Is your woodpile ready for winter ?

I'd love to have a wood burning stove and sit by a log fire on a November night and forget about the madness of the world outside. And I'm not alone. Apparently a million people in Britain have wood burning stoves. The Stove Industry Alliance (yes, there is one) says, with a modern stove, you can cut your carbon emissions by 22 per cent, compared to a regular gas fire. But it's the heart-warming effect of logs a-burning that most interests me. Especially at this depressing time of the year.

Take this week, for instance. It started with a "supermoon" but very few of us in Scotland were able to see it because of dense cloud cover on Monday night. By Tuesday the weather had brightened up but it had also turned cold. Trains were being disrupted because of slippery lines and by Thursday there was commuter chaos across central Scotland when a train broke down in the bottle-neck at Waverly station. It even led to questions – and apologies – in parliament.

Late on Tuesday night, Glasgow reminded us of its "mean city" past with a drive-by shooting by members of the underworld. A 26 year-old man "known to the police" was killed as he and a friend waited in their car at a pedestrian crossing. A dark coloured Audi Q5 drew up alongside. A single bullet was fired and the car sped away. A similar Audi Q5 was later found abandoned and burnt out in a nearby street. Who needs all those "Scottish noir" detective stories when real life is like this ?

To depress us further this week, we discovered that Scotland's children have been ranked among the least active in the world. A study by Strathclyde University found that 64 per

cent of children aged between 11 and 15 watch over two hours of television a day and most of them spend another two hours playing computer games. Only 21 per cent of boys and 15 per cent of girls get the recommended hour of physical activity a day. These are among the worst results for any of the 38 countries studied, and, in particular, worse than England and Wales. Not much wonder we are expecting obesity levels in Scotland to reach 40 per cent by 2030.

We are all steeling ourselves for the next round of austerity as the new Chancellor makes his quaintly termed "Autumn Statement" on Wednesday. They say it won't be as bad as last time but it looks like current spending will be cut in favour of long-term capital projects. What this all means for the Scottish Government's budget will not be clear till 15 December. The council has delayed its budget meeting till 9 February 2016 to allow it time to take account of the money it will have to spend.

This week we've had an announcement from Shell that it is cutting 380 jobs at its finance centre in Glasgow. And, although unemployment has shown slight improvement this month, down to 4.7 per cent, many of the 40,000 new jobs created since the Great Recession in 2008 are part-time and low-paid. The BBC has been running a series of features all week on "inequality". It reported a Stirling University study which found that the top 2 per cent of Scots have an average income of £2,000 a week while the bottom 2 per cent struggle by on £100 a week. And the gap has been getting wider.

As I write, The Scotch Whisky Association continues to thwart the will of parliament, and just about every other professional and social organisation, in opposing the idea of "minimum pricing." It lost a Court of Session case last month but is keeping us in suspense over whether it will lodge an appeal. (It has until the end of today to lodge such an appeal).

So far, the judges have ruled that the government is entitled to impose a minimum price of 50p per unit of alcohol to try to control Scotland's worrying "drink problem". It is not, in their view, an undue restriction on trade. The scandal is that the whisky barons have been able to hold up this important new law for four long years and meanwhile a quarter of Scots continue to consume alcohol at a hazardous rate.

Finally, I have only just caught up with a new phrase in the English language – "post-truth". According to the Oxford Dictionary it means that emotions and beliefs are more important than facts. I thought the word had only just been invented to describe the disgraceful Brexit and Trump campaigns but apparently it has been lurking in the chatosphere for more than two decades.

I think it's time I sought refuge in a winter-long hibernation in front of my imaginary log fire.