

# Letter from Scotland



## Councils in coalitions and chaos

Two weeks on from our local council elections, we are still in some confusion about who is in charge in our 32 districts. We're hoping that the town clerks, or "chief executives" as we must now call them, are just getting on with the day to day chores of making sure the schools are opening each morning and the care services are up and running and the dustbins are being emptied.

While the politicians haggle over coalition agreements, Scotland's 240,000 council workers are valiantly providing the services we all depend on. Which goes to show two things: we don't really need politics...at least in the short run....and local councillors don't have much power anyway.

For what it's worth, the political map that is haphazardly being formed in front of us looks like this. The SNP have more councillors than any other party (431). They are the largest party in half of the 32 districts. They have taken over the administration of Glasgow City Council, ending nearly 40 years of Labour control. Along with a few independents, they rule Dundee. They have formed the administration in Falkirk. And just about everywhere else they are the party the rest are ganging up against.

Except in Fife, where Labour has agreed to work with the SNP.

At the time of writing, it looks as though the same may happen in Edinburgh. In Aberdeen, nine Labour councillors have gone into coalition with the Conservatives (yes, the afore-hated Tories !) to keep the SNP out. For their high-mindedness, they have all been suspended from the Labour Party and will sit as Independent Labour councillors.

The Highlands, of course, is in a world of its own. Its 28 Independents have joined with the Liberal Democrats and Labour to form the administration, under the redoubtable Margaret Davidson who once again will lead the council. The Borders too are an exception, with the Conservatives in charge, along with a handful of Independents.

I can't myself see why all this coalition-forming is necessary. Why can't the largest party form the administration in each district and have to come to the full council for approval of each of its actions in turn? This would allow a proper, open debate about each policy separately, rather than having a package bundled together in haste in what we used to call "smoked filled back rooms" and now we must grandly call the "cabinet."

The process of forming these unfortunate coalitions has proved particularly messy this year because the general election campaign is taking place at the same time. Who wants to be seen in bed with the enemy as we approach 8 June ?

But actually, I doubt if these little local difficulties will matter to the electorate at large. The battle lines are already drawn; for or against independence. Even Brexit doesn't seem to matter in Scotland. It will be interesting to see over the next couple of weeks whether other issues can break through, now that the campaign in England has moved onto issues such as taxation and spending, living standards, pensions and immigration. The Scottish parties have yet to publish their manifestos.

While all this politicking has been going on, the economy has been chugging along nicely. Unemployment has fallen to 4.4 per cent, it's now lower than in the UK as a whole and the best rate for over 40 years. The number of Scots in work also grew in the last quarter by 41,000 to 74 per cent of the working age population. And many thousands of jobs are expected to come in the renewables industry with a court ruling that four

huge off-shore wind power projects can go ahead off the east coast. It's not such good news for kittiwakes, gannets and puffins however and the RSPB says it is considering an appeal.

This weekend the British Pipe Band Championship comes to Paisley and the 140<sup>th</sup> annual university boat race takes place between Edinburgh and Glasgow on the Clyde. It's also the beginning of the Church of Scotland's General Assembly.

The assembly has already been in the news because one of its guest speakers, Rev Rola Sleiman from Syria, was refused a visa by the Home Office. Some pettifogging civil servant told her he wasn't convinced she would go back to Syria after her visit or that she would be supported while here by the Church of Scotland. Lo and behold, within hours of the story appearing in the newspapers, the Home Office changed its mind.

Finally, the next time I go into my local outdoor equipment shop, Tiso's, I'll be on the look-out for one member of its glamorous staff in particular. Mollie Hughes (26) has just become the youngest British mountaineer to climb Mt Everest from both the north and south side. She and her climbing partner Jon Gupta succeeded in scaling the north face on Tuesday after spending a month on the mountain. Five years ago, she climbed the traditional south col route.

"I'm elated," she messaged from the summit, " and I'm exhausted. And I know I still have the hardest part to do, the long and difficult descent to base camp." She hopes to raise over £8,000 in sponsorship for Cancer Research UK.

When the Edinburgh councillors finally get their act together, I hope they award her a medal.

