

Letter from Scotland



A middle class revolt...at Edinburgh University.

You don't see many picket lines or industrial protests these days. And it was even stranger to see one in the heart of Scottish academia. Lecturers at Edinburgh University have joined fellow members of the University and College Union at ten Scottish universities in a series of strike days, not over pay, but pensions.



Pickets outside Old College

As a young reporter I was brought up on strikes over basic weekly pay by men in the coal and engineering industries and women in the textile trade. Industrial action is now a middle-class activity, the working class have long given up on strikes and protests. And that's a pity because injustice for the poor is worse than injustice for the rich.

But you can see the lecturers' point of view. They are talented and have worked hard to become masters of their subjects and now they are being forced to accept a much reduced pension when they retire, an average of £10,000 a year less. Not many of them are highly paid professors on £80,000 a year, even fewer are highly paid vice-chancellors on £250,000 a year. The average for university staff is around £40,000. Still well above the national average salary of £28,000, but not unduly so.

The basic problem, of course, is that we are not funding our public services well enough – either in health or education. But even within the constraint of the UK Government's "austerity" programme, you wonder if we have the pay structure right in the public services.

I don't suppose these wider issues are going to be solved at the arbitration talks now going on over the lecturers' demands. Which means we will stumble forward into a temporary deal or, next week, face a full week of strike action by UCU's 120,000 members across the UK. Students, who have their own funding problems, will then have to teach themselves and prepare for exams which may never happen.



I wonder if the Scottish Labour Party conference in Dundee this weekend will come up with any solutions to the lecturers' dispute. It has plenty of other issues on the agenda. How left-wing does the party want to be under its new leader Richard Leonard? Can it come up with major new ideas or programmes to distinguish itself from the SNP? And can it, please, define its stand on Brexit? There's to be a debate on a motion, moved by Remainers such as Ian Murray MP and the former leader Kezia Dugdale, calling for the UK Labour Party to commit itself to remaining in the Customs Union and the Single Market.

In parliament on Wednesday, Labour backed the SNP's EU Withdrawal Bill which insists that all 111 devolved powers

that are due to return to Britain from Brussels will first be lodged at Holyrood before they are passed to the UK Government for joint action. The Conservatives were the only party who voted against. It might have been interesting to see what their wider membership is making of the Brexit stew but, alas, their conference, due to be held in Aberdeen last week, was cancelled because of the snowy weather.

The UK Government [has now issued a list](#) of 24 areas where it will seek to retain in London post-Brexit.

The SNP Government seem to have got through the three-day snow storm without damage to its reputation – despite much of the country being brought to a halt. But they did have difficulties over a funding crisis at the Scottish Youth Theatre and the resignation from the party of their MSP for Aberdeen Donside Mark McDonald. He's admitted sending inappropriate text messages to women, but is insisting on coming back to Holyrood as an independent member.

I won't mention the rugby this weekend...except to say I shall be watching Scotland's game against Ireland in Dublin from behind my sofa. But if we could beat England the week before last, anything is possible.

Instead, let me report some definite good news.

First, the giant spear lily in the Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh has flowered for the first time in 60 years.

Second, researchers at Aberdeen University have shown that pine martens are good for red squirrels and bad for the invading greys.

And third, Britain's first polar bear cub for 25 years has made a public appearance with its mother at the Highland Wildlife Park at Kingussie.....aw, what a bonnie wee white thing. The snow has melted and so have our hearts.



The first polar bear cub to be born in the UK for 25 years has emerged at the Royal Zoological Society of Scotland's Highland Wildlife Park.

Previously, the birth had only been confirmed by high-pitched noises heard from the maternity den. Now the cub's first venture into the outside world has been caught on cameras installed by STV Productions during a two-year exclusive project to document the breeding and birth of the cub.

The cameras have been positioned outside the female polar bear's den since early February, giving unprecedented access for a forthcoming documentary, made for Channel 4 by STV Productions, about the park's pioneering polar bear breeding programme.