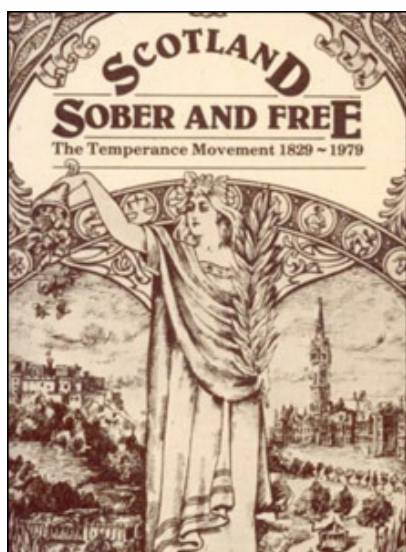


Letter from Scotland



Temperance in all things

Scotland has become the first country in the world to introduce a minimum price for alcohol. It's a bold attempt to tackle one of our many demons. From 1st May it has become a criminal offence to sell any drink for less than 50 pence per unit of alcohol. The biggest effect will be on cheap cider which almost trebles in price from around £4.70 a bottle to £11.25. A can of lager will now cost a minimum of 88p. There's less effect on a 700ml bottle of whisky but that now cannot be sold for less than £14.

The new law is supported by all the parties in the Scottish Parliament and is primarily aimed at our old habit of binge-drinking at the weekend when our town centres look like a medieval painting of hell and damnation. The doctors tell us that there are 697 hospital admissions every week caused by alcohol abuse and 22 deaths. That's 50 per cent higher than in England and Wales.

Economists tell us alcohol abuse is costing the economy £3.6bn a year. Raising the price of drink, they say, is one sure way of reducing the amount sold. Scots are currently consuming 40

per cent more than the recommended amount of alcohol per week. And, of course, it's not just the young and the poor who are doing the drinking. A lifestyle survey published by the Office of National Statistics found that 70 per cent of "professional" people had consumed alcohol in the previous week, compared to 51 per cent of manual workers. It's just that the "professional" results are less dramatic (if we can use a drinking term).

Strong drink has aye been a problem in Scotland. The stumbling red-nosed Scotsman is both a joke and a disgrace. And we are still not quite sure whether we ought to laugh or cry over our drink. Maybe it's because we find it difficult to do things in moderation. So we swing from the Temperance movements of the 19th and early 20th century to our "Slainte" culture of today when whisky is lauded one of the foundations of our economy.

In fact, the Scotch Whisky Association was able to delay the implementation of minimum pricing for six years while it fought against the will of parliament in the courts. But at last we are now embarking on this great experiment. Other countries have tried other things, from prohibition to regulated drink stores. And indeed Scotland has already tightened its laws on drink-driving and hours of sale. But this may be the final round for our heavy drinking culture.

Apart from drink, we faced two other threats to our economy this week. Our proud House of Fraser department stores are in trouble. The two shops in Edinburgh (one the famous "Jenners") and the founding store in Glasgow and at Loch Lomond are being passed from one Chinese company to another and no one quite knows what the outcome will be. It's all part of the same retail revolution which is forcing Sainsbury's and Asda to seek a merger in the face competition from low-price stores and on-line buying.

In the case of the two supermarkets this is going to be a

disaster for our farmers if the Competition and Markets Authority allows the merger to go ahead. The fewer the supermarkets the more they will be able to exercise their monopoly power and drive down prices at the farm gate. Cheap food and drink are not good things, either for our health or our economy.

Hardly a week goes by but there's trouble for our newly-merged police force, Police Scotland. The police authority is said to be considering a plan to cut police officer numbers by up to 1,200 over the next three years. Apparently this could be done while still keeping the same number of police officers on the beat by releasing more of them from back-room duties. The trouble is that the number of back-room staff has been cut by 2,000 over the past few years and there's no sign of the police budget increasing.

As if this wasn't troubling enough, a BBC investigation claimed that internal reports into corruption in the force had been watered down by senior officers. And the family in the notorious "Sheku Bayoh" case have launched a court action against Police Scotland claiming £1.8m in damages. They allege that Mr Bayoh died as a result of his arrest by police in Fife three years ago and the police investigation has failed to explain his death or bring anyone to justice.

The lawyer representing the Bayoh family, Amer Anwar has had an eventful week. He's also been acting for the family of the Lockerbie bomber Abdelbaset al-Megrahi and on Thursday they learnt that the Scottish Criminal Review Commission is to re-open its review of the case. The review is expected to take several months, so its result may well be announced just as the 30th anniversary of the bombing is being commemorated.

Oh dear, the cracks which have opened up in Reactor No 3 at the Hunterston nuclear power station are more serious than expected. The 43 year old reactor has been out of action since the beginning of March and whether it can return to

service by the end of the year is now in doubt. The French owners EDF have meanwhile bought the Neart na Gaoithe wind farm which is being developed in the Firth of Forth.

What's not in doubt is that spring is here and the winter is over. The power of nature has taken its time to crank into new life this year. But the brave "Beltane" celebrants turned out as usual on May Day morning to greet the sun on Calton Hill in Edinburgh.

Following in the tradition of that ancient ceremony, they danced the winter away and drank to the arrival of spring...with non-alcoholic juice of course !