

Letter from Scotland

Re-mortgaging your property is usually a bad sign. Things have gone wrong. And when a city like Glasgow does it, it means things have gone wrong in a big way. But that's just what the city council has had to do to put right an injustice that has been going on for more than a decade.



Selling off the Armadillo. Photo by Wojtek Gurak

It's been paying its 12,000

women workers on its care, catering and

cleaning staff, less than its male bin collectors, maintenance staff, gardeners

and janitors. Around £4,000 a year less. And now, after union pressure,

strikes, court cases and many a street demonstration, it's finally agreed to

pay them compensation.

The new SNP administration says it's righting a Labour wrong. But it's going to cost £548m. And to raise the money, eleven of the city's newest properties are to be re-mortgaged. They include the Armadillo conference centre, the Riverside Museum, the Emirates sports arena, and the new Concert Hall. In a complicated financial manoeuvre, the buildings will be transferred to an arms-length company, City Property Investments, which will then re-mortgage them, raising the millions necessary. The city council will rent the buildings back at a cost of £25m a year and keep them running, just as they are at present. Hey presto. But who knows what cuts or "efficiencies" will be needed to pay the new rents.

Glasgow is not the only council dealing with such back-pay compensation claims. There are 70,000 women workers making claims across Scotland and already they've cost the councils over £700m. And this is just one of the pressures on council budgets. The councils' own Improvement Service pointed out this week that there's been an 8.3 per cent real-terms fall in revenue for Scotland's 32 councils since 2011. And there's another £230m cut coming this year.

The damage being done to local services has prompted the Green Party to begin a debate over how we should fund such services in the future. To win the party's support for the budget the SNP Government has promised to convene all-party talks on the issue. It also conceded more tax powers to local councils to raise more of their own money.

Two of these new powers have caused the expected outrage from

the Conservatives, a tourist tax and a work-place car parking charge. But councillors in Edinburgh voted this week to press on with plans for a £2 a night tourist tax. The work-place tax, however, has run into a quagmire of second thoughts as the number of possible exceptions grows....hospital workers, teachers, emergency staff and those on low pay. (Although we understand the tax in the first place is to be levied on the employer... Ed.)

The government also ran into opposition for its plan to cut the number of people being sent to prison by abolishing sentences of less than 12 months. Labour and the Liberal Democrats support the move but the Conservatives say it's "soft-touch justice." Already there's a presumption that no one should be sentenced to jail for less than 3 months but 27 per cent of sentences currently handed out are for 3 months or less. The reason may be that although the alternative to prison, community service orders, are more effective at preventing re-offending, 30 per cent were not actually completed last year.

On Tuesday, Scotland lost two of its most talented and adventurous mountaineers. Andy Nisbet and Steve Perry were climbing together on Ben Hope, the most northerly Munro, when they fell to their deaths. Three mountain rescue teams and a coastguard helicopter were called out in snowy conditions to search for the missing pair and they were eventually found on Wednesday morning. Andy Nisbet (65) from Aberdeen pioneered over a thousand new climbing routes and Steve Perry (47) from Inverness did a winter round of the Munros in 2005/6. They've been described as "gargantuan characters" in Scotland's mountain story.



Otter magic. Photo by Mark Dumont

But to finish on a more cheerful note. A friend hurried up to me the other day to say, in excited tones, that he'd just seen an otter. He said: "An actual otter, on the Water of Leith, and with a kingfisher standing by, ready to dive down on any fish the otter might disturb." Scotland's otters are apparently doing quite well at the moment. There are an estimated 8,000 of them living around our coasts, rivers and lochs. I can testify to the thrill you get on seeing one. They slip so easily into the water, half dog, half seal.

I only mention this because of Brexit. When we come to ask what the European Union has ever done for us, let's not forget the protection of our wildlife under the European (protected species) Conservation Regulations 1994. And let us hope that we continue to protect our wildlife whether we are in or out of European waters.