

Letter from Scotland

It was a sweet sounding victory for music pupils in Midlothian. The local council was planning to be the first in Scotland to end free music tuition for junior pupils in its schools. But at the last minute, councillors backed off in the face of a well organised campaign by pupils, parents and the music fraternity.

Is this the first sign of a backlash against cuts in council services? Has the tide of austerity turned? We learned last week that despite the Scottish Government's latest budget "increases", Scotland's 32 local councils maintain they have suffered a one per cent real terms reduction in their core budgets every year for the last decade. They've been trimming at the edge of their services for too long – closing sports centres, cutting hours, increasing charges, reducing maintenance, laying off 28,000 staff since 2010 (according to the union Unison.)



Can pupil power put music back on the stand ?

Councillors in Midlothian have decided enough is enough, and instead of cutting services like free music tuition they are increasing council tax by the maximum allowed, 4.9 per cent. Until this year, the SNP government only permitted a 3 per cent rise and that followed seven years of a total freeze. Ministers said they were protecting people from higher taxes at a time of Westminster-imposed austerity.

But the result is poorer public services and a power grab by central government. It all started in the 1980s when Mrs Thatcher began slashing back the public sector and limiting the scope of local government. So now, across the UK, local taxes only account for 1.6 per cent of national income, compared to 5.8 per cent in France, 11 per cent in Germany and 15 per cent in Sweden.

In the coming months, there are going to be all-party talks on how to fund local services. This was a concession won by the Greens in exchange for their support for the Scottish budget. They were also promised a change in the rules to allow local councils to raise a couple of minor taxes, a tourist tax and a workplace parking tax. But what the politicians now have to

face up to is the reality that if we want good public services, we have to pay for them.

Reality was hard to come by at Westminster this week. In the rarefied atmosphere on St Valentine's Day, MPs again rejected the prime minister's plan for leaving the European Union but gave no guidance as to what should happen next. An SNP motion to postpone Brexit was defeated and Nicola Sturgeon said the Scottish Government was stepping up its contingency arrangements for a "reckless" no-deal exit from the EU.

The worse Brexit gets, the more the United Kingdom begins to fall apart. The issue has split the Conservative and Labour parties. The economy is shuddering. Pressure is growing for a second referendum on Scottish independence. And in Northern Ireland, Sinn Fein is calling for a referendum on a united Ireland as a way of avoiding the "backstop" of a border between North and South. As Irishman W B Yeats famously put it: "Things fall apart, the centre cannot hold."

Meanwhile in the real world, a row has broken out over Scotland's new £2bn state-sponsored investment bank. Should it be allowed to invest in carbon polluting industries? When the government asked the question, in an official consultation, 94 per cent of respondents said No. It then turned out that 1,360 of the 1,443 responses were sent in on a pro-forma letter produced by Friends of the Earth. So should the government follow "the People's wishes"?

The owner of the Grangemouth petro-chemical works, Sir Jim Ratcliffe, would certainly be disappointed. His company Ineos has benefited from government subsidies in the past. And this week he wrote to the EU saying that green taxes and European

regulations were choking the continent's chemical industry. I'm not sure how this squares with his announcement just a few weeks ago that he plans to build a £2.6bn chemical plant in Belgium. The Scottish government is certainly heading in the other direction, admittedly at a slower pace. It's announced a new £10m "Saltire fund" to encourage firms to develop tidal technology.

Finally, this week's Saltire prize goes to Larry Barilli from Greenock. He's celebrating 65 years as a football manager. At the age of 83, he is still a dab foot at "keepie-uppie" and not only coaches his local team, Chaplins FC, but takes their shirts home and washes them himself each week. And he still has a part-time job as a taxi driver.

Larry formed his first team at the age of 18 and played into his 40s, winning 23 cup finals. He's now on to his fifth team and says he's only missed half a dozen games in his entire career. What does he think of the professional game these days: "Too much back passing and too much pushing and shoving."

Remind you of anything going on at Westminster?