

Letter from Scotland

The Scottish Labour Party used to be the power in the land. This weekend it's gathering in Dundee for its annual conference as just a rump of what it once was. And it's deeply divided.

It's now the third party in the Scottish Parliament, after the SNP and the Conservatives. It only has seven Scottish MPs at Westminster, it used to have 50. In none of the 32 local councils does it have a majority, not even in Glasgow.



How are the mighty fallen. David and Goliath by Titian. Labour is sliding in the opinion polls, in the most recent it's down below 20 per cent. Membership and donations are falling. And as its conference gets under way, there are deep divisions over Brexit. And at least two rows have broken out – one over the treatment of its MEPs and another over antisemitism.

How can such a mighty political giant have fallen? A big part

of the answer has to be the rise of the SNP who have taken full advantage of the devolved Scottish Parliament to elaborate their case for independence. Another part of the answer is Labour's own fault. It failed to stand up to Westminster austerity and, since Jack McConnell lost the election in 2007, the party has not managed to find a successful leader.

The Scottish Parliament and the Welsh Assembly joined forces this week to try to offer the UK government some leadership on Europe. They passed a common resolution calling on Theresa May to rule out a no-deal Brexit and to ask for an extension of the two-year negotiating period. Due to Welsh sensitivities (ie Welsh Labour's indecision) the resolution says nothing about a "people's vote" or a second EU referendum.



Richard Leonard MSP

The current leader Richard Leonard comes from a trade union background has the unfortunate disadvantage of a Yorkshire accent – though he has lived in Scotland since he was a student.

He also comes from the Corbynista wing of the Labour Party, so his muddled stand on Brexit has exasperated much of the party's membership in Scotland. Indeed it's one of the

tragedies of the whole Brexit debate, that the Labour Party, at Scottish and UK level, has not offered the country any real leadership over this most vital matter. But perhaps this weekend in Dundee we will see all that change.

Staying with Dundee for a moment. This week the city council and the Chamber of Commerce launched a joint campaign to become the first “living wage” city in Britain. So far, 50 employers have signed up to it, covering half of all workers in the city, and it’s hoped to double that number in the near future. There are, of course, many figures used for the “ living wage” but the one chosen by Dundee is £9 an hour, well above the legal minimum wage of £7.83.



EIS members outside the City Chambers
And while on the subject of pay, the teacher’s pay dispute goes on, despite my prediction last month that it would be settled. In fact, talks have broken down again and the main teachers’ union, the EIS is balloting its

members on strike action. This week, college lecturers staged another 24 hour strike in pursuit of their pay claim. It's the third such strike this year. And the universities may be also be facing tough negotiations in the next pay round, since two-thirds of them have reported a deficit for the last financial year.

Knife crime in Scotland may be falling – in contrast to England – but people are still being stabbed in the street. The actor Tam Dean Burn, famous for his roles in Outlander, Fortitude and River City, was stabbed in the neck while he was leaving an event in the Poetry Library, just off the Royal Mile in Edinburgh. He was taken to hospital for treatment. A 42 year-old man was later arrested but it's not clear what the motive was.



Tam Dean Burn learns about Tai Chi with Thistle Foundation in 2017

As I write, it appears that Scotland has lost another of its elite mountaineers. Tom Ballard (31) and his Italian companion Daniele Nardi (43) were attempting to climb Nanga Parbat in the Himalayas when

it's thought they were swept away in an avalanche. A search operation involving helicopters and drones, as well as a Spanish climbing team, has failed to find any trace of the two men. Tom Ballard's name may ring a bell. His mother, Alison Hargreaves, died in 1995 while descending K2 when Tom was just six years old. She was the first woman to conquer Everest alone and without oxygen. The family lived in Fort William and Tom soon followed in his mother's footsteps, almost literally, becoming the first to climb all six major Alpine routes alone in a single winter.

Such high flying examples of the human spirit somehow put our everyday lives in perspective. We humans are capable so many wonderful things, but we are also capable of messing things up.