

# Letter from Scotland

The rising cost of living has been the issue of the week here in Scotland, as in the rest of Britain.

The capitalist “trickle-down effect” has dried up and according to the Poverty and Inequality Commission nearly 20 per cent of the working age population of Scotland are living in poverty. With inflation due to hit 10 per cent and wage rises at 4 per cent (at best), it’s going to get worse. Not least, because of Putin’s war in Ukraine and the consequent gas crisis.

The Queen’s Speech, delivered by the Duke of Rothesay (Prince Charles’ Scottish title) outlining the Westminster government’s legislative programme, has been widely condemned in Scotland for doing little or nothing to ease the cost of

living. Nicola Sturgeon said Boris Johnson “needs to stop talking and show action.” The Labour Party said the government should cut VAT and levy a windfall tax on the bloated profits of the oil companies to reduce energy costs for the poorest households.



The trickle-down effect running dry on Goat Fell, Arran. The media have been full of desperately sad stories from the food banks and children's and old folks' charities. A survey for The Scotsman found that 41 per cent of households are struggling to pay their energy and grocery bills. And 81 per cent said they were “worried” about the cost of living.

It was, of course, the main issue in the local council elections last week which resulted in another big win for the SNP, the 15<sup>th</sup> election win in succession. The party took 34 per cent of the vote. Labour came second, with 28 per cent, overtaking the Conservatives who dropped below 20 per cent.

They lost 63 councillors. The leader Douglas Ross blamed Boris' lockdown parties in Downing Street.

Both the Liberal Democrats (8 per cent) and the Greens (6 per cent) gained votes and councillors. So now the haggling has started into who will form the administration in each of the 32 district councils. The proportional system of voting has meant only two councils have majority parties – the SNP in Dundee and Labour in West Dunbartonshire. As usual, Orkney and Shetland and the Western Isles will continue to be run by sturdy Independents.

There was much crowing by all parties at first minister's questions at Holyrood on Thursday. But Nicola Sturgeon's celebrations were rudely interrupted by awkward questions about the notorious ferry building contract with Ferguson's shipyard on the Clyde. Why was the £97million deal (now risen to nearly £200m) agreed, against the advice of Caledonian MacBrayne's procurement experts ? Earlier in the week, the current transport minister Jenny Gilruth cleverly found a missing e-mail which told us "who" authorised the deal – it was the former transport minister Derek McKay – but alas did not explain "why". The reason, of course, is obvious. It was to save the yard from closure and to have the ferries built in Scotland and not in Turkey. But it suits the political game to continue the argument.

The SNP suffered another post-election embarrassment when one of their former Glasgow MPs Natalie McGarry was found guilty of embezzling £25,000 from two pro-independence campaigning groups. An earlier conviction was overturned on appeal but this time the jury found her guilty after a six week trial. Her lawyers explained that her finances were often disorganised and chaotic. She will be sentenced next month.

On Tuesday we woke to the glad news that our familiar convenience store chain R S McColl had been rescued from "administration" by the supermarket giant Morrison's. The

16,000 staff at its 1400 stores throughout Britain were much relieved. The history of McColl's is a tale worth telling. It began in 1901 when Robert Smyth McColl and his brother Tom opened a sweet shop in Queen Margaret Drive in Glasgow. "Toffee Bob", as he was known, rose from humble beginnings to be the best footballer Scotland ever had.

He played centre forward for Queen's Park, then for Rangers and for Scotland. He was the only Scot to score 6 goals in a single game (against Port Glasgow). In his international career he scored a hat-trick against Wales, Ireland and England. He's been described as the Pele of his day. He served as a sergeant in the army during the First World War and continued to expand his sweet shop chain until the Great Depression meant he had to sell up to Cadbury's. Although the chain has been through several owners since, the name R S McColl has remained on many a high street in Scotland and now looks set to continue.

Toffee Bob would have been over the proverbial moon at Rangers' success in the Europa League. They play Eintracht Frankfurt in the final in Seville on Wednesday. And I'm sure he'd been happy to sell his sweets to any passing Celtic supporters who this week have been celebrating their triumph in the Scottish League.