

Letter from Scotland

Scots don't often take to the streets but there's been a lot of standing about on cold damp days this week. Teachers have been on picket lines outside their schools in the first teacher's strike for 40 years.

So too have university lecturers. And in 14 towns and cities up and down the country, independence campaigners have been protesting against a Supreme Court ruling that another referendum cannot be held without the UK government's permission.

There's the smoke of revolution in the air. Workers of all sorts – teachers, doctors, nurses, postal workers, railway engineers – are all demanding pay rises that at least keep up with the 10 per cent rise the cost of living. The Scottish government is trying to hold the line at five per cent, or at most the seven per cent which it has offered to ancillary workers in the health service. It argues that it doesn't have any of the UK government's freedom to increase borrowing or

taxation to pay for it. And all this comes, of course, after a decade of “austerity” in the public services.



“What do we want?” Independence campaigners at the Scottish Parliament

No wonder half the country believes the only way out of this quagmire is “independence”. The UK Supreme Court ruling on Wednesday was, to many of them, an expected disappointment. The five judges were unanimous in deciding that, under the devolution legislation, the Scottish Parliament can only hold a referendum with the agreement of the UK parliament.

Nicola Sturgeon has interpreted this as an attack on democracy and proof that the United Kingdom is not a union of free consenting nations. In a fiery speech to the crowd outside the Scottish Parliament on that damp, cold Wednesday night she declared: “From today, the independence movement is as much about democracy as it is about independence.”

In more than slight frustration, she is asking what more she has to do to give the people a choice on independence. The SNP have won every election since 2007 with a promise of an independence referendum in its manifesto. The current Scottish Parliament has specifically called for one. But Ms Sturgeon is going to have another go at persuading the Conservatives at Westminster to agree to a referendum as they did in 2014. She is going to make the next UK general election, in two years' time, a "de facto referendum" on independence.

It's not clear what this means exactly, but it will certainly be a useful campaigning tool to persuade more Scots to join the independence cause and put pressure on whoever is in charge at Westminster to grant a second referendum.

The opposition parties have been left struggling to respond. The Scottish Conservatives have stuck to their old saw that it's all a distraction from the issues of today, the cost of living crisis and the strikes in the public services. Labour have their old master Gordon Brown preparing a "federal" plan for a new united Britain.

The SNP see all this constitutional business not as a distraction from present troubles but a solution. The difficulty is that it's a long-term solution. And in the short term, this winter looks like a rather familiar battle field between a Conservative government at Westminster and public sector workers, with the Scottish government stuck awkwardly in the middle.

I wonder whether it will be a battle on the epic scale of the Thatcher years or whether there will be a muddling-through, in which we all accept that we have to take a 7 percent cut in our living standards as predicted by the Office of Budget Responsibility. If we do, I hope we don't forget the 20 per cent of the population for whom a cut in living standards means destitution.

A straight-forward way would be to stop giving benefits to the whole population and instead target them on the poorer households. I have in mind, the increases in the state pension, the winter fuel allowance and the energy bill subsidies.

I'm sure everyone has their own solutions. And their own way of coping with the challenges of the winter... wearing old coats while huddling round one-bar electric heaters, planning a cheaper Christmas, watching the World Cup, or just plain old hibernation.

I just hope my grandchildren don't ask me what I did during the revolution.