

Letter from Scotland

The Scottish finance minister John Swinney may not be the richest ruler in the world but he has scraped the bottom of his budget to find some crumbs of comfort for the poorest households, now facing a cold and costly winter.

And winter really has struck Scotland this week. The freezing Arctic air has driven temperatures down to minus six or seven during the day and minus 10°C at night. On Tuesday night in Braemar, the village thermometer dropped to minus 17°C. While the whole country crunched around on ice, the north east had deep snowfalls, closing many schools and mountain roads. In Shetland, electric cables were brought down by the weight of snow and some 2,800 homes were without power, some for several days. More heavy snow is forecast for the whole country before the "beast from the north" returns to his den.



Deputy First Minister and temporary Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Economy, John Swinney MSP, delivers the Scottish Budget for 23-24 to the Scottish parliament.. 15 December 2022. Pic-Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

So Mr Swinney sought to play the role of Good King Wenceslas when he trudged through the snow and ice to The Scottish Parliament on Thursday and announced his budget for next year. It is aimed at tackling child poverty and low pay. The temporary uplift in the Scottish Child Payment, to £25 a week, is to be made permanent. There's an extra £1 billion for the NHS to help fund a nurses' pay rise, £550 million extra for local councils to help fund pay rises for care staff, teachers and bin men. And the £20 million set aside for an independence referendum will be diverted to a "fuel insecurity fund" to help the poorest households meet their electricity and gas bills.



Wenceslas, the first ruler to notice that the poor suffer in cold weather. Painting by George Sheridan Knowles 1863-1931
He also played the role of Robin Hood, increasing income tax

by a penny in the pound on those earning more than £43,000, which he estimated would bring in an extra £390 million a year. And he confirmed that councils would be free to increase council tax to whatever level they felt was justified. His budget, he said, was aimed at creating a fairer society. Scotland was rejecting the "austerity" agenda of the Conservative government at Westminster.

Whether all this will be enough to settle the nurses' pay dispute, and the rest of the NHS workers' claims, not to mention the pay demands of the Scotrail unions, remains to be seen. Probably it will, given the Christmas pressures on strikers' income and the season's spirit of goodwill. It may be that Scotland will avoid the battle of wills going on in the rest of the UK between the unions and the Sunak government. Again, Scotland is doing things differently and people here seem to approve. Support for independence is hardening, according to a number of recent opinion polls.

On Monday we woke to the extraordinary news that a man suspected to be the Lockerbie bomb maker had been arrested and would appear in court in the United States. The exact circumstances of his arrest remain murky, but Abu Agila Mohammad Mas'ud duly appeared in court in Washington DC on three charges relating to the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie almost exactly 35 years ago.

He has always been suspected of being involved in the bombing but the Libyan government, under Colonel Gaddafi, refused to hand him over for trial. Now it appears, one of the warring groups in Libya has traded him to the Americans for we know not what. The secrets of the past are being slowly revealed by the shifting desert sands.

This weekend, Scotland's premier division football clubs will be resuming play in ice cold stadiums after pausing to let their fans watch the World Cup in the desert sands of Qatar. Though on Sunday afternoon, they will surely be joining the

estimated audience of 300 million people who will be watching the final between France and Argentina.

Meanwhile, out in the Atlantic, five brave lads from Portobello will be straining at the oars in the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge, the 3,000 mile rowing race between the Canary islands and Antigua. Led by actor Cal MacAninch, they are raising money for the mental health charity Body and Soul.

They will need both body and soul to get through their challenge, just as the rest of us will need body and soul to survive this tough start to the winter.



Alec Martin and Cal MacAninch who will be part of the five man team in the Talisker whisky Atlantic Challenge PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter