

Letter from Scotland

Scotland's SNP/Green government finds itself in an awkward corner. It is faced with strikes and pay demands in the education and health systems, but it does not have the power to do anything about them.

That's almost true, and it's certainly what ministers are saying.

Teachers have been on [strike](#) across Scotland this week, on Tuesday in primary schools and on Wednesday in secondary schools. And from Monday, there will be rolling strikes in two districts each week for the next 16 weeks. Of course there have been talks between the unions, the council employers and the Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville but they have only been about tweaking the basic five per cent offer, rather than any new money towards the 10 per cent pay rise teachers are demanding.



Scottish education is not what it used to be. The Old School House, Pencaitland.

As Ms Somerville keeps saying, her hands are tied by the fixed block grant given to The Scottish Government by Westminster. If teachers were to be given more, that would need to come out of some other budget, like other council workers' pay or the health service. This is not quite true, since the Scottish government could increase income tax or reform the council tax system. But no one likes to talk about tax increases, neither the SNP nor the opposition parties.

And that's where it gets unfair, because the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats are forever pointing out the dreadful state of the public services but not saying exactly how they would fix them. And, strangely, their message is getting through. In an opinion survey for "Scotland in the Union", over 60 per cent of respondents said the SNP was performing poorly on the economy, the railways and the

NHS.

The health service has been another worrying issue this week. Doctors have been warning the NHS is effectively dead in many areas and on life support in others...waiting times, a backlog of routine surgery, vacancies in nursing and doctors posts, pressure on existing staff. Nicola Sturgeon called a special press conference to announce that Scotland's hospitals are 95 per cent full, even more full than they were during the height of the Covid pandemic.

Then, of course, we took the prospect of hospitals being overwhelmed seriously. We built a temporary thousand-bed £65 million hospital and moved thousands of bed-blocking patients out into nursing homes. But this time, there's no emergency plan, apparently, only £8 million to buy up space in a few nursing homes and there's certainly no more money for nurses, who are still threatening strike action. Yet ministers say it's the worst winter the NHS has ever experienced. I find it all quite confusing.

So much of what politicians do is purely symbolic. Take Rushi Sunak's visit to Scotland this week for instance. It was for talks with Nicola Sturgeon and to announce new so-called "free-ports" on the Cromarty Firth and the Firth of Forth. The talks were to discuss how the Scottish and UK governments "could co-operate meaningfully". It was a gesture towards a more polite Union, rather than the rude messages given by the Johnson and Truss governments. But we all know there are huge differences between the two leaders, over "austerity", oil and gas, and an independence referendum.

And as for the Freeports, the idea that they will promote economic growth is highly doubtful. A study by the Institute for Government found that there's little evidence they do anything but divert business from elsewhere and there's a high risk they will be used for tax evasion and looser regulation. And if they are to be "green" free-ports, as the Scottish

government insists, does this mean only environmentally correct companies will be able to operate there?

But at least Mr Sunak has used his two days in Scotland to signal he wants to keep Scotland in the Union and promote economic growth. But it's a misleading gesture, because if he really wanted to do both he would abandon his austerity programme.

So we are in the land of fantasy, where Peter Pan might sprinkle pixie dust on our problems and make them go away. This week, a lecturer at Aberdeen University warned students against the dangers of studying J M Barrie's play. It could be "emotionally challenging," he warns "with odd perspectives on gender." Other books similarly terrifying are "Treasure Island" by Robert Louis Stevenson and "The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe" by C S Lewis. The lecturer says delicate students may prefer not to participate in any discussion of such material at their own discretion and without judgement.

I wonder what such students will make of the big wide world when they grow up. I know I'm frightened by it and I didn't flinch once when I read Peter Pan, even when he said "Like the ticking crocodile, time is chasing after all of us".

And Capital Theatres confirmed this week that next year's panto will be...Peter Pan.

**ALLAN STEWART GRANT STOTT
JORDAN YOUNG**



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