

Letter from Scotland

Councillors across Scotland's 32 local districts have been setting their council tax rates this week. It's turning out to be a precarious balancing act between paying their staff a decent wage – notably their school teachers – and incurring the wrath of their rate payers.

Not a great deal of courage has been shown by the politicians, who, mostly, have been settling for a 5 per cent increase in local council tax, when they know in their hearts the increase needs to be 10 per cent, to keep pace with inflation. In Orkney, councillors have displayed a fine Viking spirit and have increased the tax by 10 per cent, but in Perth and Kinross the SNP minority administration has been forced by the Conservatives and others to hold down the increase to 3.9 per cent.

We now wait to see what this means for local services – schools, social care, roads, libraries, sports centres, waste collection etc. And what it means for the teachers, who have been striking for two days this week for a 10 per cent pay rise. The local councils have been arguing they can only afford at 5 per cent rise, unless they get more money from the central government.



Councillors wrestle with rising costs. “Alexander the Great tames his horse Bucephalus.” by John Steell (1804-1891)

If the politicians, local and national, had more of that Nordic spirit they would find the money from pretty obvious wealth taxes. A proper local taxation scheme, valuing houses for what they are really worth – or even keeping up with England, would bring in an additional £900 million a year. And if The Scottish government were to introduce a retirement levy to pay for care services, there would be another £1bn a year to work with.

Of course neither of these ideas – nor any funding ideas – are being advanced by the three candidates in the race to succeed Nicola Sturgeon as leader of the SNP and first minister. Humza Yousaf, Kate Forbes and Ash Regan have begun a series of election hustings for party members with a rather tame encounter in Cumbernauld. There were respectful differences over marginal issues such as gender recognition, same-sex

marriage, and the timing of the plastic bottle return scheme.

But as the campaign develops over the next four weeks, we may see more substantial differences, over the economy, the NHS, the fight against poverty, school performance and the route to independence. What is becoming clear is that the Sturgeon era is nearly over and a new generation will emerge in the spring. One of the party's old war-horses, John Swinney, has already announced he will be retiring from the government when the new leader is elected.

In all our little turmoils, it's easy to forget the real troubles of the world outside – the earthquakes, the floods, the droughts, the 20 major wars – Yemen, Eritrea, Somalia, Myanmar, and to our shame, even here in Europe. On the first anniversary of Putin's war in Ukraine this week, there were marches and rallies in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Dundee. It was so moving to hear young Ukrainian refugees speak of their pride in the country fighting back against Russian aggression. I only hope that when this war is over and Putin is dead, they can forgive the Russian people and accept they were misled by an evil dictator.



Rally for Ukraine, Holyrood.

Of course it's not so long ago we had our own troubles here in the UK. Even this week, the Prime Minister has been trying to save the Good Friday Agreement, which finally brought peace to Northern Ireland. Rishi Sunak's "Windsor Agreement" on trade across the Irish Sea will hopefully persuade the Ulster Unionists to end their boycott of the Assembly. Many people, including myself, are wondering if it's so good for Northern Ireland to remain in the European free market, then why would it not be good for Scotland, or indeed the whole of the UK? Brexit is unravelling.

There are signs too that the bottle re-cycling scheme, mentioned above, is unravelling. This is due to come into operation in August when sellers of drinks in plastic and glass bottles will have to charge a 20p deposit to customers, who can claim it back at special re-turning points.

The three leadership contenders have all aired their doubts

about the scheme as it stands. It follows an outcry from some business leaders that the scheme is a shambles. It's already been postponed by a year and many bottle producers have not signed up to it because of the costs involved. Yet they will be banned from selling drinks in plastic or glass bottles if they don't.

The scheme has a political element too, because the Green Party would very probably withdraw from the coalition if it doesn't go ahead in August. Both the SNP and the Greens are keen to implement a bottle re-return scheme a year ahead of a similar one being prepared in England and to catch up with environmentally progressive countries like Denmark, Germany and Canada. The minister for the "circular economy", the Green MSP Lorna Slater, says it will cut street litter by a third and cut CO2 emissions by four million tonnes over 25 years.

If you ask me, sellers of plastic bottles have been getting away with polluting the planet for years and they are lucky not to have their products banned outright. It's yet another example of the changes we are going to have to make if we are to take climate change seriously.