

Letter from Scotland

We are living in a winter wonderland where everyone is pointing to our local council services collapsing but no one is suggesting what we should do about it.

We are in another of those mental blocks – as we are over climate change and how to end the wars in Gaza and Ukraine. It's as if we've developed a winter death wish.

The politicians are the worst affected but the trade unions and professional bodies are just as hesitant. This week we had everyone pointing to the care services in crisis, school standards slipping, libraries and sports centres closing. You would think the nation's "Wise People" would be trumpeting their favourite solutions. But no, Scotland's 32 local councils are left to muddle through, cutting here and there, using up reserves, promising services but failing to deliver.



Council services...who's in the saddle ? Edinburgh City Chambers.

The councils' association COSLA warned this week that many councils face "bankruptcy" after a decade of cuts. It must be so disheartening for the workers involved, being expected to do tasks but not being given the necessary resources. It's time for the government to come clean and ask councils to do less, or fund them properly.

The Scottish Finance Minister, Shona Robison, called an extra cabinet meeting on Thursday to figure out what to do in her Budget, due before Christmas. She's unlikely to play Santa Claus.

"Tory austerity" at Westminster has apparently left a £1 billion hole in her overall budget of £60 billion. She has to fill that by either cutting services or increasing taxes, and probably both.

I'm puzzled why she only needs to find £1 billion, because the councils alone say they need £1 billion to maintain services in the sorry state they are in now. And yet she has many other demands to satisfy – from the police and fire service, the courts, housing, transport, the arts and sport and, above all, the sacred NHS. The First Minister Humza Yousaf has not made Ms Robison's task any easier with his off-the cuff announcement at the SNP conference of a council tax freeze.



First Minister Humza Yousaf PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter
The SNP have had council tax freezes, or limits, for 12 years out of their 16 years in power. The Fraser of Allander Institute has calculated that if council tax had risen by as much as it did in England over that period, councils would have £900m more to send each year. The freeze is in fact the SNP own "austerity" policy.

The party keeps promising to find a fairer alternative to the council tax, which is levied on the value of people's homes and business premises. But that search has been going on for 30 years and meanwhile the valuation of properties has not

been updated.

My own solution to the crisis in local government funding is simply to revalue all properties – area by area and band by band – and make the council tax match the wealth of the people paying it. Overall it would mean a 40 per cent rise in charges, in order to raise the £1 billion needed to keep services as they are. The average council tax bill would need to rise from £1,300 a year to £1,620. This is the scale of the problem we are facing. But like all big problems, no one can bear to face them, and we continue wandering through wonderland.

The result of council cuts was obvious in this week's dismal figures on pupil attainment in Scotland's schools, most of them run by local councils. We have slipped from being one of the best performing education systems in the world to being below average in maths and science among the 81 countries in the OECD study and only slightly above average in literacy.

More than 3,000 15-year pupils in 117 Scottish schools were involved in the so-called "Pisa" tests. The figures have led to much Scottish-style soul searching, particularly as we are now lagging behind England.

The government has blamed the Covid shut-downs and the distracting influence of smart phones but those are not unique to Scotland. Other explanations are more convincing – cuts to council school budgets and the "Curriculum for Excellence" introduced in 2010. The teachers' unions point to class sizes in Scotland being among the highest in the study and there have been severe cuts to the number of support staff.

The debate over the curriculum has been rumbling on for years. It was supposed to be world-beating, shifting the emphasis of education from knowledge to skills, and giving teacher's more flexibility in what, and how, they teach. Instead it's become mired in bureaucracy and confusion. It still has to justify

its extravagant name.

As we hurtle towards Christmas, I hope in the pause between Boxing Day and New Year, we Scots will have time to consider our options – whether we want to take collective action to save our public services, or whether we want to return to a minimal state, which the economist J K Galbraith memorably described as “private affluence amidst public squalor”.