

Letter from Scotland

We're not quite sure whether spring has started or whether winter will haunt us till the equinox on 17 March. The crocuses and early daffodils have made a brave appearance, the birds are singing but there's still no scent of vegetation in the air. And there's not been much to cheer us in the news either.

There have been two shocking murder cases, with awkward questions for the police to answer. College staff have been on strike. 300 people in Aberdeen are being moved out of their homes because of weak concrete, the dreaded "RAAC" issue, which threatens public buildings all over the country. And the parliament has passed a rather dismal budget, which has left local councils and the housing industry in despair.



A disturbing time for the March Hare. Illustration by Philip Mendoza (1898-1973)

To begin with those murder cases. Iain Packer, a middle aged man with a bulldog face, was sentenced to 36 years in jail at the High Court in Glasgow for the murder of Emma Caldwell, 11 charges of rape and 21 other charges, all involving Glasgow sex-workers. The astonishing thing is that it has taken 19 years since Emma's body was found buried in woodland for Packer to be brought to trial, despite the fact that police

questioned him at the time and he was widely suspected of being the man responsible.

It appears the police were side-tracked into believing that four Turkish men were guilty and junior officers were told not to investigate Packer further. Even when the case against the Turkish men collapsed, the police failed to re-open inquiries about Packer and threatened journalists with legal action if they published anything about him. It's only the persistence of the press and Emma's family that kept the case alive and other women have come forward with evidence.

It looks like there is now going to be a public inquiry into the police handling of the case and, in particular whether a culture of misogyny, corruption and cover-up existed in the police at the time and whether it persists today.

It's not been a good week for Police Scotland. When a 65 year old estate worker was found dead near Aberfeldy while out walking his dog, the police said it appeared he had died due to "medical causes". Six days later it emerged he'd been shot and it was a case of murder. Twelve days later, the police are still not explaining their error or telling us anything about the weapon involved or what leads the inquiry is following.

There were plenty of questions, on both cases, flying around The Scottish Parliament during the week, rather over-shadowing the most important event of the year, the passing of the government's £60bn Budget. It's most controversial measures are the freeze in council tax, a big cut in the housing budget and an increase in income tax, especially for high earners.

Some councils – notably Argyll and Bute and Inverclyde – are refusing to implement the freeze in council tax, and are planning to raise the tax by more than 5 per cent, thus making them ineligible for government compensation.

The cuts in housing budgets – a 26 per cent cut for social housing and an overall cut of 43 per cent – have been

condemned by homeless groups and childrens charities, saying it's an attack on the poor. And while the finance minister Shona Robison says the income tax changes will bring in £1.5bn in extra revenue, her budget is still limited by the "austere" block grant she gets from Westminster.

The cuts in the housing budget come just as the "RAAC" issue has re-emerged, this time in some 300 council houses in the Torry area of Aberdeen. Residents will have to be re-housed over the next few weeks while the aerated concrete is removed. Aberdeen council is inspecting 20,000 other council properties suspected of having the same problem. Councils all over the country are dreading what they will find. Some 40 schools and 9 universities in Scotland have so far had some of their buildings closed down.

The strike by lecturers and support staff at Scotland's 21 further education colleges on Thursday highlights one of the other issues with the Budget. It's supposed to put us on the road to the political holy grail of "economic growth" but it contains a cut of 6 per cent in the funding of universities and colleges which employers say are some of the main engines of growth.

Perhaps we shouldn't dwell on the troubles of the winter when we are heading into the spring. On a positive note, the government is thinking of [designating a third National Park](#), 20 years after establishing the Loch Lomond and Trossachs National Park and the Cairngorms National Park. The deadline for submitting bids has just passed and this weekend the Minister, the Green MSP Lorna Slater, will be looking through the applications.

At one point there were a dozen contenders but several have dropped out when they've encountered local opposition. Among those still in the running are Galloway, the Borders, Tay Forest, Lochaber, Loch Awe and a Marine Park along the north-west coast. The new park is supposed to be in operation by

the end of 2026.

Let's hope we still have seasons then.

