

Letter from Scotland

The message we're getting this week from governments in London and Edinburgh is: "Times are tough, citizens will have to do more for themselves."

Yes, the good ship Austerity is back on shore. Government money is going to be targeted, universal benefits can no longer be afforded.

The people are expected to row their own boat and communities will have to do more for themselves. An idyllic example is the story of the St Ayles skiffs. This community project began in 2009 at the Scottish Fisheries Museum in Fife. The idea was to revive the coastal tradition of rowing regattas and encourage a community spirit.

The museum commissioned a boat-builder Iain Oughtred to come up with a classic design for a small wooden boat which could be assembled from a kit by local communities and maintained and rowed by volunteers. Now almost every coastal village has one. There are 250 around Britain and the St Ayles' movement has spread around the world.



Row your own boat. A St Ayles Skiff on the beach at Ullapool. Such rugged self-reliance is all very well but it relies on strong community support. Not everyone lives in helpful coastal villages. Both Labour and the SNP have drifted into

accepting the doctrine of neoliberalism where low taxes and small government are the norm. So people are being asked to pull on the oars themselves. The winter fuel allowance will be restricted to those on welfare benefits, and in Scotland, free school meals for children in primary 6 and 7 will only be offered to the poorest families.

A report this week from the children's charity Barnardo's finds that 27 per cent of parents in Scotland have struggled to provide food for their children in the past year. Around 7 per cent have had to rely on food banks. So the announcement that free school meals are not to be rolled out as promised and the winter fuel allowance of £500 is to be restricted, has caused political uneasiness.

At Westminster, Sir Keir Starmer has pushed the cuts through parliament, despite a rebellion by nearly 50 of his own MPs. At Holyrood, the SNP government was defeated on its cuts to free school meals...but the cuts are going ahead anyway.

It's not been a great week for the SNP. There was a second defeat for the government over its plan to end the £40m subsidy to Scot Rail to suspend peak-time fares. Then news broke that Petro-Ineos is definitely going ahead with closing its oil refinery at Grangemouth next summer, with the loss of 400 jobs.

It has left both the Scottish and the British governments scrambling to fulfil election promises to save Grangemouth. They were supposed to come up with a plan to re-imagine the site as a renewables hub. But so far they have only produced a willowy wish-list and £100 million has been pledged in short-term measures to cushion the blow for Grangemouth.

In fact the whole transition from oil to renewables has been slipping back. This week the Deputy First Minister Kate Forbes published her "Green Industrial Strategy" which has been welcomed by the oil and gas industry. A sure sign that she has

surrendered the SNP's ambition to lead the world in cutting carbon emissions.

Another disappointment for the government was that deaths from alcohol abuse in Scotland have reached a 15-year high (1,277). It casts doubt on the effectiveness of the pioneering "minimum unit price" policy. Perhaps the price was set too low at 50 per unit. It's due to go up to 65 pence at the end of this month.

There's been an anxious debate this week as to whether Glasgow should stage the Commonwealth Games in 2026. It follows the withdrawal of Victoria in Australia, citing financial problems. The Commonwealth Games Federation says it has £100m to stage a scaled-back games – with just 10 events and no new facilities. But both the Scottish and UK governments have said they are not prepared to underwrite any over-spend. There are now doubts about the whole future of the Games and the role of the Commonwealth in the modern world.

It's been a cold week and snow has been falling on Cairn Gorm. The reality of winter's approach is beginning to dawn and, as our governments are warning, there are hard times ahead.

The chilling thing is that they are mostly of both governments own making. By refusing to raise tax on the richer half of the population, they are imposing poor public services on us all and leaving the very poorest families struggling to survive.



Sir Keir Starmer MP, The Prime Minister (Holborn and St Pancras, Labour) at Prime Minister's Questions 11 September 2024 © House of Commons