

Letter from Scotland

We've just come through a long cold spell of weather with mean, drizzly skies and daytime temperatures between 2 and 5 degrees Celsius. This weekend it's turned mild, wet and windy. But whatever the weather, the snowdrops and the crocuses just keep to their cheerful business of growing and delighting us.

In contrast, our human February is all about the annual tribulations of tax and spend. Our 32 local councils are in the process of fixing their council tax levels for the coming financial year. For most of the last 17 years, this local tax has been frozen by the SNP government, meaning we are paying £100 less on average than we were in 2007. They also chickened out of revaluing property values. So the tax revenues are way below what councils need to provide local services like schools, social care, waste collections, road repairs, libraries and sport centres. Yet these are the very things citizens need day by day.



It's that time of year again. Snowdrops at Dawyck Gardens. This year however, councils are being allowed to raise their council tax to whatever level they want. Most, including Glasgow and Edinburgh, are going for increases of around 8 per cent. A few, like East Lothian and the Borders, have decided on a 10 per cent increase. The average house owner will see their annual council tax bill rise by £100 to £1,600.

Even then, the councils say they will face a funding gap of £400 million, just to keep services as they are now. (The Accounts Commission puts the gap at £759m) The finance secretary Shona Robison says she's giving councils an extra £1 billion next year but that's largely to cover increase in wages she's already agreed with the unions.

So here we have a typical case of under-funding of public services, across Britain, what we used to call "austerity" when the Conservatives were in power at Westminster. Under Labour, we call it "abiding by the fiscal rules" and keeping

to its election promise not to increase taxes “on working people.” I don’t myself see how this squares with Labour’s other promises to promote economic growth and fix the public services. But consistency is not a quality much approved of by political parties.

We were presented with another example of chronic under-funding this week when the first of 390 prisoners were released early because our jails are so over-crowded. The Scottish justice system is particularly keen on putting people in prison. It has one of the highest rates in Europe. So it’s not surprising that we have 8,300 people in prison and our most notorious jail, Barlinnie, is 35 per cent over-capacity. A new and bigger prison is being built, at a cost of £1bn.

The justice system is also keen on making people wait a long time to have their case heard in court. There’s a backlog of cases queueing up for two or three years. It’s partly due to a lack of spending on the court system over the last 20 years but there must also be something wrong with the system itself. We spend £45,000 a year keeping someone in prison – only to re-offend, in many cases – instead of spending half that amount on a proper system of community service.

I wonder, for instance, what will happen to the 74-year-old woman who was arrested this week for protesting against abortion outside the Queen Elizabeth hospital in Glasgow. It’s the first arrest under the new “buffer zone” law preventing any protest or vigil within 200 metres of an abortion centre. It’s a law which was cited by the US vice president, James David Vance, as evidence that free speech was under attack in Europe. (Most of what Vice President Vance has said recently has been debunked).

We stumbled into more moral soft-sand at first minister’s question time on Thursday when John Swinney came under pressure from the Conservative leader Russell Findlay to spell out the government’s rules on gender. It arises out of an

employment tribunal case in Kirkcaldy in which a nurse complained about a trans-women doctor using the ladies changing room in the local hospital. Mr Swinney said it was clear under the Equality Act that women-only spaces were allowed and indeed protected. And he accused Mr Findlay of stoking up the culture war on gender.

It may only be a sport, but football can be so cruel. Celtic were 1- 0 up against the mighty Bayern Munich on Wednesday night in Munich's own stadium, when, in a scramble in the goal mouth in the 94th minute, Bayern scored an equaliser. It was enough to put Celtic out of the European Champions League because, strangely, Celtic had lost 2-1 when Bayern came to Glasgow in the first round. How can Lady Luck play so teasingly?

Whose side will she be on when Scotland's men's rugby team play England at Twickenham on Saturday? Scotland are chasing a fifth consecutive win in the Calcutta Cup, the oldest international rugby competition in the world. Last year the result was a win for Scotland 30-21.



A hat-trick of tries by Scotland Wing, Duhan van der Merwe capped a great afternoon at Murrayfield with Scotland retaining the Calcutta Cup by beating England 30-21.
Credit: Ian Jacobs