

Stephen Clackson's Letter from School Place

Regularly reporting on the exploits of your councillor in Kirkwall, the North Isles, and beyond.

Sadly, the risk of spreading avian influenza scuppered there being a poultry section at this year's Sanday Show—the section the Clackson Family usually does fairly well in. Undaunted, by means of a technical loophole, we were able to exhibit a dozen of our very youngest poultry in the industrial section, and won first and second prizes for “hen eggs, any other colour”. When I was a lad, growing up in Somerset, village shows often featured ferret racing (in the recent past, an attraction at both the Sanday Show and the Shapinsay Show, too) and “ferrier” racing, where visitors enter their pet dogs on the day (of any breed, although whippets invariably outclass the Pekingese). However, I wouldn't recommend the event tried one year at the Over-Wyresdale Local Livestock Show in Abbeystead, Lancashire—a chicken race. On release from the traps, the fowl fled in all directions, and for days afterwards the owners were coaxing their birds down from their roosts in the nearby trees!

I attended a memorial event at Aberdeen University to celebrate the life of my former colleague, Dr John Reid, who died in February 2021. In his *Reflections of a Natural Philosopher* (<https://homepages.abdn.ac.uk/npmuseum/article/Biogs/JSR.pdf>), written after over 40 years in academia, John observed: “Universities have become very stressful places to work. They didn't used to be. Inspiration and creativity are now managed within an inch of their lives. The tail seems to be wagging the dog, in that administration drives most activities, although academics have to pretend otherwise. Most research seems to be done by the temporarily employed, which is not a happy way to run the system; even the so called permanently employed have to spend a substantial amount of their research potential in selling their knowledge and ideas to justify their continuing existence; ‘success’ seems to be judged by specious measures and their ranking tables. The problem seems to be that those who fund research and who manage research staff have been asked to justify their allocation of resources. It seems an obvious and fair question but the honest answer is that the value of science is determined largely by posterity, which is the ultimate judge of whether knowledge gained has lasting value. A typical time between the publication of Nobel Prize winning science and the Nobel award is about 25 years, though there are exceptions. Management runs on short-term measures, so they compile statistics like publication rate, journals used, number of recent citations of published work, etc., summarised by impact factors; they analyse questionnaires whose answers are compiled into ranking tables. They peer at their spreadsheets and pronounce. The net result is that broadly speaking science is not carried on in the first place for the benefit of science but for the benefit of satisfying management.” In my experience, this bureaucratic “management mindset” governs our entire educational system, and our healthcare system too—to the detriment of everybody.

Unfettered capitalist economics are also making their contribution to the detriment of everybody, which we are now encountering in the impending cost-of-living crisis. It is tempting to descend into a state of Weltschmerz or sink into the Slough of Despond, but a more constructive approach is to adopt the “make-do-and-mend” attitude of our forebears, and also to heed the wise words of Dr Samuel Johnson: “The proverbial oracles of our parsimonious ancestors have informed us that the fatal waste of our fortune is by small expenses, by the profusion of sums too little singly to alarm our caution and which we never suffer ourselves to consider together.” More succinctly put: “Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves.” Maybe the Amish have got it right after all. They don't rely on mains electricity, and they use horse-drawn buggies (autonomous vehicles powered by biofuel) for transport, so they are less exposed to world energy-price fluctuations.

It is a supreme irony that, while Orkney is a net exporter of green energy to the rest of the UK, we pay the most per kWh for our electricity. This irony is now being compounded by delays connecting Orkney consumers to the power network. I believe the time has come for us to resurrect, and seriously reconsider, my past proposal to establish an Orkney energy company.

I shall be revisiting (in collaboration with Green Councillor Kristopher Leask) the possibility of getting a by-law enacted by the Council to restrict the importation of honeybees into Orkney. This is to protect the bees already here from becoming infected by diseases which, although endemic elsewhere, are thankfully still absent from our islands and not the bane of Orkney's beekeepers. This was something I attempted when I first became a councillor, ten years ago, however at that time EU regulations stood in the way. Now we have left the EU, Kristopher and I are trusting that this obstacle has been removed.

The probable closure of Stromness Church is regarded as newsworthy by the local media, yet the threat of such a fate has been hanging, unreported, over churches in the Isles for some time. On being informed of his appointment to the position of Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland (2021-22), Lord Wallace of Tankerness proclaimed: “Hopefully I can reflect some of the spirit of island life.” That spirit would seem to have been one of steady abandonment of island congregations by the Kirk, including in islands that formed parts of his constituency when he was an MP and an MSP. I see these closures as representing nothing less than the renunciation of the Church of Scotland's “distinctive call and duty to bring the ordinances of religion to the people in every parish of Scotland through a territorial ministry”, enshrined a century ago in *Article Declaratory III* of its constitution and the *Church of Scotland Act 1921*. **Q:** What do the banks and the Kirk have in common? **A:** They are all closing their less-profitable branches!

The recess is now at an end, and I'm looking forward to being back at School Place.

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Letter from School Place is also available on-line at clackson.info

