



*Each week, on a rotational basis, one of our six Highland Council representatives will let us know his or her views on what's happening locally. This week we hear from JIM MCGILLIVRAY of Embo, councillor for East Sutherland and Edderton. Next week is the turn of Robbie Rowantree, Brora, one of the North, West and Central Sutherland representatives.*

## Fighting the fires of financial austerity

THE longest day has come again, lingered briefly, and departed in regrettable haste.

Another midsummer now to add to my score, each one coming round faster than the last, with little time to cherish a brief warm moment in the sun, and only a brief shy moment to look back and consider those memories, which, in the words of Welsh poet and cleric R S Thomas, I have "left like an ornament on the mind's shelf, covered with the dust of its summers".

Internationally, the Arab Spring spreads into summer. It has progressed out of Africa with the change of season and on into the Middle East.

Across the Mediterranean, there may yet be a Greek tragedy to witness as the danger of national debt default – perhaps multiple national defaults with severe and unpredictable repercussions across the eurozone – could become reality before the start of the autumn.

Each season this year brings its changes in more ways than one, and even here we are far from immune to these effects. It will be fascinating in time to come to read the histories of this dramatic year and of the consequences which ensue.

Change is unsettling. It destabilises set patterns of life and behaviour. It disrupts both individual peace of mind and whole economies. Regrettably, it happens, despite our best efforts. "Thig atharrachadh air gach àm is feumar atharrachadh leis" – "Times change and we must change with them" – is an old adage from a time when both Roman and Celtic empires flourished. This may be ancient pragmatic wisdom but is not particularly reassuring in the modern context.

Even the Highland Council, for its entire existence a haven of relative peace, must undergo change. There is a constant stream of cost-cutting initiatives emanating from Glenurquhart Road, and I am not alone in demanding that these ideas should be discussed fully at ward level before they are progressed to the report stage.

It is one thing indeed to have what seems like a marvellous idea while sitting in front of a spreadsheet in the safety of a council office, but it is the serving councillor on the ground who has to pick up the inevitable tab of unintended consequences, and who, ultimately, has to face the ire of angry constituents.

So far we have had the vexing issue of classroom assistants, and the recent emergence of a solution has to be welcomed, but only after a lot of valued employees have been upset. Grass-cutting contracts have been retained by the council in the northern district but have gone out to private contractors in other areas, leaving a lot of grief for councillors there. The highly-prized Service Point system has been restructured and contracted. Funding to the voluntary sector and to social enterprises has had to be reduced considerably. The pending integration of social work services with NHS activity is already bringing problems with community care provision.

In the education service, an "arm's-length organisation" is being formed to run community leisure facilities in order to save £1 million on non-domestic rates. It must be one of the wonders of the modern world that central government hands down money to local authorities, levies non-domestic rates on its properties back into the Exchequer, then hands back again a small portion of these proceeds.

There are some things you simply just couldn't make up.

Also in this service, the unique and valued Sutherland coach and minibus system has come under threat. Even the traditional role of school jannies, legends all, could well be reconstituted into a "facilities management" hierarchy under new initiatives.

I can only sigh, and keep doing my small bit to fight the fires lit by the friction of financial austerity. Central government has decreed that adequate money is no longer forthcoming, and local authority

officers have to balance the books. In this blighted scenario, it is the responsibility of the council administration to pick a tortuous path through the ravaged landscape and salvage as much as possible of previous service delivery.

It would be good to have some idea of the timescale for this era of tightened belts. One director of service has said in recent conversation that he has never in his entire career experienced this duration or intensity of financial restraint, and that a further five years is to be expected according to his sources.

This has serious implications for not only public-sector employees but also private-sector businesses which have, or are seeking, council and NHS contracts in their portfolios. I have made this point in previous articles and will not labour it again.

At the same time, the recent disclosure of a 1.4 per cent reduction in national consumer spending during May is a serious warning of things to come. Retail therapy is a habit of good times and, like all habits, can change with circumstances to meet the disposable money in the purse. There may be signs of inflation going up, but more importantly there are absolutely no signs of wages rising, or of food and fuel bills coming down.

I have already written to John Thurso MP to request that he asks the Monetary Policy Committee to get round the whole country, and observe in person where things are at, before they sanction any rise in interest rates.

And maybe that is why the Chancellor, from the safety of the House of Commons, can bravely defend his addiction to his Plan A of fiscal austerity. There are other plans mooted, but we will never know during the term of this government whether they might have been more effective and less painful.

To complete the thoughts of R S Thomas above: "Time is a main road, eternity the turning that we don't take."