

News Letter

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MORNING VIEW

Ulster's Olympic aspiration

THE Olympic Games in London is only a year away and the buzz around the capital is one of intense anticipation and excitement for what will be the biggest ever sporting extravaganza ever held in this country. Interest in obtaining tickets for the various events has been phenomenal with demand far exceeding supply, resulting in disappointment for many among the two million applicants. London 2012 chairman Lord Sebastian Coe, who has faced some criticism for the method of selling the tickets, remains buoyant over what is in store for UK sports enthusiasts. "There was an extraordinary demand for tickets so there's a massive opportunity to build on that level of excitement. "No sporting event in the history of sport or Olympic Games - no sport in my lifetime - has had that kind of demand," said Lord Coe. Undoubtedly, a significant number of tickets will have found their way to Northern Ireland and competitors from here will not be short of vocal support in their events. There is disappointment that Olympic teams from abroad have not considered Northern Ireland as a training pad ahead of the Games, but, realistically, we have not an abundance of the type of top class facilities required by competitors at this level and, as a UK region, we are not alone in missing out on this opportunity. The best chance Ulster competitors have of winning Olympic medals is in rowing, cycling, shooting and boxing and our elite sportsmen and women will be honing their skills in the hope of emulating the fantastic feat of Dame Mary Peters, who so memorably won gold at the 1972 Games in Munich.

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Letters

Payment to reserves has a sting in the tail

IN November 2010, the minister for justice, David Ford, made an announcement that the UK government had set up a £20m gratuity fund for recognition of service performed by the RUCGC Part-Time Reserve.

All members were asked to apply by February 4, 2011. This was later extended to the end of March.

In all 6,222 members officially applied and were verified.

Now nine months later, there is the possibility of actually receiving payment - albeit with a sting in the tail.

The sting is that, while MLA Peter Robinson secured £20m for this gratuity payment as part of the deal to bring peace to Northern Ireland, now the chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, on June 24, confirmed in writing to

Mr Ford that the government will be taking back tax and national insurance payments.

So, HM Revenue and Customs will be clawing back an amount in the region of £8m, made up of tax and two NI contributions (employee and employer), leaving just £12m for distribution amongst 6,222 applicants, depending on length of service.

Reference had been made to the MoD paying a token amount of tax and NI to HMRC on the disbandment of the battalions of the home RIR, to ensure the soldiers received their payments in full.

There was also a comparison made to the NI Civil Service when they arranged the settlement payments for their equal pay claims for staff in 2010. Here the NICS agreed to pay the tax and NI contributions of

its staff, and an assurance was also received from HMRC that this lump sum would not affect the staff who were in receipt of "tax credits".

The payment of this gratuity to the reserve is being classed as "earned income and therefore liable to the full payments of tax and NI due".

Mr Osborne states: "I do not propose to create a new tax exemption specifically for the purpose of these payments. There is no precedent or clear justification for doing so and it would be contrary to the government's commitment to simplifying the tax system".

But a precedent has been set, by the NICS payment to staff.

Ex Part-Time Reservist

It's a dog-eat-dog world

I CANNOT help but wonder if the politicians could not learn a thing or two about life from animals. Certainly with the hell and mayhem throughout the world today, it leads me to think about that.

Take the canine world as an example: there are all sorts of dogs, from the toy poodle to the Great Dane as well as those in between such as collies, American pit bull terriers, Rottweillers and even Jack Russell terriers.

As for the homo sapiens, there are all sorts, from the tribes in the jungle, to the rich and famous and royalty.

There are the tax-paying, law-abiding citizens, but there are also gangsters, rapists, murderers, etc, all belonging to the human race.

Now take for example that some dog lover decides to introduce these dogs into communal living, where they all can live in mutual understanding with each other. He then rounds them all up and puts the lot into an enclosed compound.

What happens next? Well, there will be a canine hell beyond imagination. The proverbial saying of "dog eat dog" would not

do justice to the canine slaughter that would take place.

Dogs, like humans, have their own identity and their own preferred habits. Each to their own can live in harmony with each other, but throw them into an environment that they do not recognise, or accept, and all hell breaks loose.

Likewise, the European Union is the perfect example of what is happening to the homo sapien.

Harry Stephenson
Kircubbin

Parade not a proud event

THE annual Belfast Pride parade is not something Belfast should be proud of. The public flaunting of homosexual behaviour, which common sense says is unnatural and God says is immoral, is something which most ordinary folk find distasteful.

The acceptance of homosexuality also misleads young people, undermines marriage, divides families and damages society.

Thankfully, people do not have to remain trapped in the 'gay' lifestyle - the Christian gospel offers a way out, to any who put their trust in Jesus Christ.

As the Bible says: "Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners." (1 Timothy 1v15)
Rev Philip Campbell

PLATFORM

AT the Woodland Trust we enthusiastically champion the need to double woodland cover. Northern Ireland is in fact one of the least wooded regions in Europe, with woodland covering a mere 6.5 per cent of the land area, compared to 13 per cent in the UK and 44 per cent across Europe as a whole.

With the passing of the Forestry Act last year, the Executive has devised a commendable legal framework that is capable of assisting in the drive to double woodland cover.

Even more crucially, the woodland creation agenda enjoys a strong democratic mandate. Both Sinn Fein and the Alliance Party committed to double the area of forest cover in their election manifestos, and the DUP pledged to increase Northern Ireland's native forests.

With a Sinn Fein Minister in post at the Department for

Election promises have faded, with the Forest Service cutting its woodland creation target, says **LEE BRUCE**



Agriculture, it might reasonably be expected that the forthcoming Programme for Government set a target for tree planting that aligns to her party's ambition to double forest cover. Sadly, however, the early signals emanating from Forest Service are remarkably unimpressive. Forest Service, the agency charged with delivering forest expansion on behalf of the Department of Agriculture, has decided to more than halve their short-term woodland creation targets.

Not only does this contradict the Executive's commitment to double forest area over the

next 50 years (using the target set by Forest Service it would take approximately 400 years to double woodland cover), it also undermines the environmental platform the agriculture minister Michelle O'Neill stood on as a Sinn Fein MLA at the Assembly election in May.

The palpable lack of commitment begs the question as to whether election manifestos - the platforms on which MLAs stand - retain any role in informing the environmental targets the Executive aspire to achieve.

The setting of environmental targets, such as those for tree

Removal of flag could cause turmoil

THE letters to the editor on the potential removal of the Union flag from Belfast City Hall show how strongly the pro-British population feel about this matter.

I can understand the position of the nationalist parties and their declared opposition to the Union flag.

However, I do have something of a dilemma when the more moderate Alliance Party sides with Sinn Fein on a subject on which there are varying views.

The topic has the potential to harm progress made in community relations over recent years, slow as it is; it may well be dreadfully damaged.

If the flag is taken down unionists will see the removal as confirming Belfast is becoming a nationalist city.

The strong perception of the students' union at Queen's University as a "cold house for unionists" may well become an assessment of Belfast City Council.

In this delicate political atmosphere composure, clear thinking and political leadership are required; this is not the time for huge political risks.

Belfast has made political and economic progress over the past number of years and in the current tough business circumstances the city cannot afford political turmoil.

Let those who make the decisions think long and hard about their responsibilities.

Change for the sake of change is not a positive thing.

It was said by USA President John F Kennedy: "United there is little we cannot do in a host of cooperative ventures; divided there is little we can do."

Belfast cannot afford the division caused by such an extremely provocative act as the removal of the national flag.

SWW
Belfast

planting, appears to be an incredibly dysfunctional process in which the public vote for one set of commitments only for these to be discarded by an agency of the Executive shortly after the election.

To avoid this pitfall the Executive must offer a credible woodland creation target that provides a baseline for measuring success and sets the trajectory towards the ultimate aim of doubling the area of woodland in Northern Ireland. In setting the direction of forestry policy for the next four years in the Programme for Government, the Executive will be in a position to instruct Forest Service to deliver on the public's desire to see a far more wooded landscape in Northern Ireland.

Lee Bruce is government affairs officer at the Woodland Trust