

Notes from a very small island

Of discontent?

An odd thing happened here last week, someone protested by dumping numerous trays of eggs on the steps of the Castle, the headquarters of the government. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the reason for doing this, and I am not in a position to voice an opinion, it is unusual for someone to go to such lengths to make their feelings known.

Once the fire brigade had hosed away the mess reactions varied, some people were amused, some supportive, some outraged at the act of vandalism itself and some upset at the waste of good food. My initial reaction tended to the first yet quickly changed to the latter.

Given the complaint was about egg production the protest may be an odd one, the cost of food here is prohibitively expensive for many people. I paid £3.40 for 6 local eggs yesterday which I would never do at home, even Waitrose might blush at charging that much and I didn't even get a free cup of coffee. What I did get though was a pleasant 5 minutes of chat with the lady running the shop. Don't ever be in a hurry when you go shopping here or else your time in the queue will be a frustrating one, however as there is never a need to be somewhere quickly, newcomers to the island like me just need to learn to relax.

Average incomes hover around the £8,000 a year mark yet the cost of food bears no relation to that low income. So, whether dumping food on the steps of the seat of government was an act of desperation or not it certainly caught the attention of the island, leading to a two page spread in the local weekly paper discoursing at length on the history of hen rearing on St Helena and letters to the editor signed off anonymously. Local radio presenters outdid each other in the creation of various egg-based puns, all except me of course. I present a weekly radio show on Saturday afternoons on Saint FM but I give no opinions at all except forecasts for Premier League games or cricket matches that are invariably proved to be wrong. I therefore refrained from describing the start of the football season yesterday as being 'egg-citing' or praising a result as being 'egg-cellent' for a particular club.

Back to discontent. People here are never afraid to voice discontent amongst themselves and often take on a similar role to the football fan who thinks the manager of the team is useless. Simple solutions are suggested as if these had never occurred to anyone else to sage nodding by those around. Failing ideas for an easy fix then the target for unspecified criticism is often the Department for International Development or that umbrella term SHG. SHG can cover any of the myriad government departments or agencies of the Saint Helena Government, as it accounts for about 50% of the economy here the finger of blame is often unconsciously being pointed at the person expressing the opinion.

Whether there is true discontent or not I am not clear. This is a beautiful place with a population that is extremely giving and is watched over by a benevolent government backed by one of the largest economies of the world. What we may be seeing is a reaction to the desire by the paymasters in the UK for the island to develop an economy that is self-sustaining. Without a history of entrepreneurship cutting the purse strings to the mother country is going to be a rocky process for everyone. However, it may also be that people are not truly discontent but, going back to the footballing analogy, they like to criticise the referee. Without a political equivalent of VAR I suspect the referee may continue to be seen to be responsible for the team's performance.

- Duncan Cooke




TWO HARCOURT
BUILDINGS

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