

Jeni Boyd

The January Party

Alma was excited. She had joined the local newspaper team when she left school at 18, eschewing the idea of University in favour of an apprenticeship. She also did not want to end up in debt as most of her friends were destined to do. She had always thought for herself and taken, not 'the path less travelled' necessarily, but 'the path less easy'. But now it was all paying off. After only three years of writing about fêtes, cakes and dog shows (and one donkey kidnapping) she had just been given her first solo politico. She was to cover the opening session of the annual assembly held in the newly built Hall.

The round building was far bigger inside than it appeared from the outside and Alma was reminded of The Tardis in her favourite childhood t.v. show, 'Dr Who.' The main room was sleek stone, and was so minimalist it could have been ancient *or* modern.. The seating was divided into 12 segments of slightly unequal numbers. Seven blocks had 31 seats and four had 30 with one having 28 open seats plus one, which remained covered. Not many of the seats were occupied and her heart sank somewhat as this was probably why she had been assigned this task. No other reporters were interested.

She took her seat in the upper balcony and found the stone seating not only warm but also surprisingly comfortable. She got out her recorder and her notepad. This was not just because she was a bit 'old school' but because she liked to record expressions, gestures, looks, which all helped give a greater understanding to the dynamics of any exchanges between people.

A commanding voice began the proceedings following the usual rituals of standing up, sitting down and muttering set responses. Then, with a slight change in tone "I invite the Honourable Member January to begin the proceedings. "

A pale slim woman stood nervously and gazed around, taking in the empty seats and began her prepared speech. "Mr Speaker, Honourable members. As you know my party, together with February are the newcomers to this Union, being invited to join the other ten members in 46B.C. We were named after the Roman God Janus ..." December stretched and yawned in a rather ostentatious manner, readjusted his bow-tie then closed his eyes.

January continued, "Janus looks back at the past and forward to the future and because of this he was chosen to be the figurehead of the year. To 'buy' his co-operation he was promised status, power, wealth, prestige. He was a popular god and we were honoured that he accepted. But before we look to the future I would like to focus on the present. Promises have been broken: far from being fêted the National Opinion Polls, since their inception, have without fail shown that January is the least popular month. Vox populi complains that:

'it's freezing cold, damp, miserable and dark by half four',

'You're completely broke and feel guilty about gorging on all the food over Christmas'

'... you have to go back to work or school – there is nothing to look forward to.'

'New Year Resolutions rarely last beyond the month – more guilt!'

Statistics show that you are more likely to have an accident on the roads, that there is a higher incidence of illness resulting in record numbers of days taken off work, and the hospitality industries struggle when we could most do with them to cheer us up.

One of my constituents summed it up as *'a month of bloody Mondays. We spend four weeks eating beans and pulses and avoiding alcohol and everyone is in a bad mood. It's hard to get out of bed let alone to the gym.'*

The wonderful promise of a new beginning to the year has been high-jacked by December who have promoted New Year's Eve as the main celebration leaving New Year's Day as a time of hangovers, bad breath and bills. We used to have January Sales until November got in on the act with Black Friday. Of course they did let us keep the income tax deadline! We do have Burns Night but not many Sasanachs understand the appeal of this kirk-defying, hard drinking womaniser that is so dear to the hearts of the Scots. This leaves us with Holocaust Memorial Day – and before you start to accuse me of anti-semitism let me make it clear that we are proud and honoured to commemorate and remember the suffering of the Jews, just as November is proud and honoured to host Remembrance Day but unlike November that also has the festivities and excitement surrounding November 5th, January has nothing to offset the sombre tones that are echoed in the grey skies."

Right on cue, it seemed, the lights in the Hall flickered.

"And so we look to the other aspect of our god Janus: the ability to look forward to the future. And, as I look to the future I can only see unrest increasing in this country, as we have seen in other parts of the world, America, Brazil, with the danger of destroying democracy running alongside the uprising of the working people whose strikes are creating havoc." An edge now lined her voice and her face hardened. "We have become the 'Spare' month, we are no longer appreciated or loved. Were we ever? In this speech I have begun to expose some of the institutionalised Januaryism in this government, illustrated by the poor turn out today. We all need to remember that 'winters of discontent' have brought down governments.

The much flaunted idea of levelling up has proved to be impossible to implement because there is an unwillingness amongst other parties to share finite resources. There are only so many Bank Holidays and Festivals. So the January party is calling for a levelling down. Each of the other members need to address how they can each contribute to a more even spread of wealth, health and happiness.

I also take this opportunity to remind you that there are over 20 calendars in use in the World and these calendars do not begin and end at the same time. There is an underlying arrogance in the assumption that the Gregorian calendar should be the only regulator of man and his activities on earth. Things can change.“

A debate then followed with July accusing January, being in the middle of the winter season, of suffering from a ‘stropky’ middle child syndrome. May, quoting the First Nation people of America, referred to the fact that January is sometimes called the month of the wolf, suggesting his honourable colleague was ‘howling at the moon’. This was quickly rebuffed by January who, with a nod to Romulus and Remus, pointed out that wolves have a reputation for being maternal and nurturing and also, as a pack animal, for working cooperatively.

October conceded that his party’s name implied his was the 8th month, whereas it is in fact the tenth, which he thought made them appear rather ridiculous to the electorate. September, November and December murmured in accord.

February thought the idea was an interesting one and declared himself fully on board but with one proviso. A special protocol was needed to protect the 29th, which functioned as a corrective measure because the earth’s orbit is not precisely 365 days.

While listening to the debate Alma was also furiously typing up her copy (at over 60wpm) to send off to her editor.

The Speaker finally asked for January’s closing remarks. She concluded that a pathway for change must be decided upon and implemented to prevent further action then ended by stating that her party was in the process of balloting all members over whether strike action should be taken.

Alma noted that this bombshell was left to the last and raised an audible gasp from the few members still awake.

Ten minutes later Alma proudly pressed ‘send’ on her laptop and feeling rather pleased with herself, hurried home to anxiously await the first edition, which would be published somewhere between 1 and 4 a.m. As she dozed she dreamt of the headlines ‘JANUARY STRIKES?’ with her name on the strap line. But, when she first got her hands on the issue she had to search for any evidence of her work. Then she saw a small cartoon on the front page featuring a young child in a pram, tears flowing, surrounded by toys thrown to the ground. On the wall behind was a calendar, headed ‘January Blues’.

After her initial disappointment had died down Alma carefully filed away all her notes, alongside the submitted copy, for future use. She knew that she was onto something, something that others, blinded perhaps by their January apathy, could not see. She opened a new folder naming it ‘Reality check’ - she would continue her research after breakfast. Closing down all the open windows on her PC she glanced knowingly at her screensaver: a photo of Laura Kuenssberg.