

BRIAN WILSON

writes



One of the oldest tricks in the PR book is to put the descriptor “Scottish” or better still “Highland” into the names of dubious enterprises. The dodgier the deal, the more useful a dash of tartan becomes to convey an image of couthy respectability.

That does not, of course, mean that all businesses which use these terms of national or regional identification are dodgy. Far from it. But neither does it mean that their mere adoption should be accepted at face value as the guarantor of anything; least of all, where the profits go.

“Scottish” Fuels is an interesting case in point. There are few more economically significant companies operating within the circulation area of this newspaper. This is because they have a near-monopoly grip on these staffs of modern life — petrol, diesel and heating oil. And the question of how they exercise that power affects every single household.

It is fair to say that “Scottish” Fuels do not command a great deal of public confidence in their business dealings. When their monopoly looks like being broken, their response is to buy up the company which is posing a commercial threat. It is widely believed that they exploit their near-monopoly position to inflict penal pricing policies on fragile rural economies.

Last week, on the basis of credible evidence, they were accused of pre-empting the proposed 5p island fuel discount by edging their wholesale prices up a few more pennies. If there is public money in the pipeline, they appear to have reasoned, then it is the right and obligation of “Scottish” Fuels to get there first.

So who are “Scottish” Fuels in whom such power over whole communities is vested? Closer inspection suggests that a more accurate title might be Irish Commen — and I do not use the term lightly. Every time I do the most basic research on the organisation of which Scottish Fuels are part, they have just had yet another unflattering encounter with the law in its various forms. The question must seriously be asked — are these fit persons to be allowed such power? And should that question be taken to their doorstep in Dublin?

The parent company is called DCC, founded in 1976 by a guy called Jimmy Flavin, becoming a conglomerate which owned and invested in all sorts of businesses — from pharmaceuticals and health care to bananas and KP Nuts (maybe we could boycott them). It was only in 2001 that DCC entered the oil market with the purchase of its Scottish distribution business from BP. Scottish Fuels was born and given a name.

Quickly latching on to the profitability of the sector, DCC’s energy sector grew by acquisition and now operates under at least 44 different names and is the biggest supplier of heating oil in Britain. And that, as it happens, is relevant to their latest legal difficulty. They

have just been convicted by the Office of Fair Trading of conning consumers by offering misleading advice on the price of heating oil.

The deception arose from the fact that DCC own a price comparison website called boilerjuice.com which did not reveal to consumers its shared DCC parentage with some of the companies whose prices were being compared. Nice one! In lieu of court action, the OFT has now obtained undertakings from boilerjuice (DCC aka Scottish Fuels etc etc) that it will desist from “business practices that are misleading”.

This follows hard on the heels of a court case in North Wales brought by consumer protection departments of two councils against another DCC subsidiary, GB Oils. On this occasion, the company was fined £51,000 on 17 counts of overcharging. Customers had been misled into paying 15p more per litre than they had expected. “This is no part of any organised scheme,” declared the QC representing DCC/GB Oils. Believe that if you will — and check your heating bills at the same time.

However, the local difficulties encountered by DCC and its many different identities in the UK shrink into insignificance when compared with the running legal battle they were shrouded in for a decade on their home patch. This was the biggest insider trading case in Irish history, involved the sale of DCC’s share in Fyffe’s and led to them repaying 41 million euros to the conned banana company and its shareholders.

I could go on. But the very least that can be said is that DCC/Scottish Fuels have a track record that does not merely justify distrust and suspicion, but demands it. Yet these are the same people who are at the heart of the whole fuel price issue which afflicts the West Highlands and Islands — and doubtless some other places where DCC operate.

The united demand, which is well within the power of both Holyrood and Whitehall to enforce, must be for DCC/Scottish Fuels to open their books in order to assist with inquiries into the 30 per cent fuel price differential which afflicts us. It is a demand which cries out for some political leadership and persistence. Not much chance of that locally, so maybe the Scottish Affairs Select Committee which is visiting us this week could take an interest?

And by the way — at a time when the Irish economy was heading for the knacker’s yard, DCC’s energy division increased profits last year by 17.2 per cent. That money came from somewhere, and it certainly wasn’t from Ireland.

STILL ON THE SUBJECT of comen, I am saddened to note that Mr Giovanni di Stefano, formerly legal adviser to the Skye Windfarm Action Group, is due to appear at Southwark Crown Court next week on 18 charges of fraud, theft and money-laundering.

Let us hope that the public benches are filled by his loyal associates. Mr John Hodgson, erstwhile resident of Edinbane and former Tory candidate for Ross, Cromarty and Skye, will surely fly in from his adopted Spanish home to offer a character reference. And for Sir Jeremy — “not on our island” Isaacs and his lady wife, Southwark Crown Court must only be a hop, skip and a pas-de-deux from the Royal Opera House.

For did Mr di Stefano not answer the call from these fonts of righteousness when they stood four-square against democracy and its attendant dangers in Skye? Now in his hour of need, they must reciprocate. He may have been the defender of Saddam Hussein and Harold Shipman but they are dead and cannot attend. It is up to John and Jeremy.