

Letter from Scotland



The An Teallach ridge,
Dundonnell, in “the great
wilderness”.

On a glorious sunny day this week, on Tuesday, I had the privilege of being in the 19.5 per cent of Scotland which has been designated “wild land.” A climber friend of mine was taking me over one of our most spectacular mountains, An Teallach, south of Ullapool. As we stood on the top, we could see mighty ridges, glens far below, range after range of mountains, blue sea lochs that stretched out to ocean and the wide blue sky. This was true “wilderness.” It gives you a sense of awe and wonder and delight, especially if you come from a city, as I do.

Scottish Natural Heritage has tried to capture this sense of wonder and draw a map of where it may be found and where it needs to be protected. But this is where the trouble begins because “wilderness” is about perception. It can mean a beautiful natural place or it can mean a desert, needing to be developed.

So when I came down from my mountain and bought a copy of The West Highland Free Press I found SNH and its map under attack from the natives. “Undemocratic and stifling,” thundered its editorial page. “We do not accept the right of the southern majority to dictate land use to the Highlands. We don’t tell you where to build your shopping malls. Don’t tell us what and what not to do in our glens.”

The SNH map identifies 42 areas of wild land, most of them in the Highlands and Islands (though the Merrick in Galloway and the northern half of Arran are included). What the Highlanders fear is that developments such as roads, buildings, wind farms

etc will not be allowed, or will be “stifled”, in these areas. In their eyes, it’s another case of the Highland clearances.

What the Highlanders don’t realise is that we city dwellers need breathing spaces too, places where we can be in touch with nature. Yes we have our parks and local nature reserves but we also need wild places on a scale that puts mankind in perspective, as tiny temporary dots on the surface of a large and eternal planet.

Put like that, it might be hard to get excited about this week’s referendum news. But the Prime Minister has been in Scotland again this week to make the case for Union to what he called “the silent majority.” He announced £500m of investment for Glasgow – including the long-awaited rail link to Glasgow Airport. The SNP, of course, said that was dwarfed by the money the Scottish Government is already spending in Glasgow. And the Finance Secretary, John Swinney, announced he would be allocating £4.2bn for infrastructure spending in the first two years of an independent Scotland. Today Mr Cameron will go to Rosyth to watch the Queen name Britain’s new aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth. Another referendum message?

On Wednesday we had a visit from American royalty in the flamboyant form of Donald Trump. He flew into Turnberry – his latest golf acquisition- to announce he was going to re-align two of the greens and spend at least £100m up-grading the hotel. He also wanted to mend fences with Alex Salmond after the two golfing pals fell out over the wind farm project just off Mr Trump’s other golf course on the Aberdeenshire coast. “I like Alex Salmond,” he declared, “other than the fact that we disagree over one element – wind, which is obsolete.”

Obsolete it may be to Mr Trump but it seems it’s more popular than ever with small independent energy producers. Scottish Renewables reported this week that there’s been a 50 per cent increase in the number of small-scale renewable energy projects in Scotland in the last year and more than half are

wind farms. There are now nearly 300 of them. Meanwhile, down the road at Torness nuclear power station, things have not been going well. It's currently operating at a quarter of its capacity after an electrical fault shut down one of its reactors and the other is running slowly while awaiting maintenance.

Finally, as Wimbledon comes to its final set and the World Cup too, I'm shaken by how cruel sport can be. One minute Andy Murray is cruising to a sure-fire win, coming through the first two rounds in straight sets and then suddenly he loses to an outsider. And each knock-out match in Brazil is a heart-stopper in which either side could win. It all seems to be in the lap of the Gods of Chance. Thrilling but frightening.

I need the peace of great open spaces to calm down and realise that life below the skyline is only a small part of the what the world is about.