

Letter from Scotland



For the next fortnight Scotland will be on show to the rest of the world. It's a frightening thought. What will the big wide world, with its teeming millions, make of our Commonwealth Games ? Just as the World Cup shone a searing spot-light on Brazil, so the Glasgow Games will expose us to unforgiving scrutiny.

Will the opening ceremony on Wednesday be spectacular and entertaining enough ? Will Susan Boyle and Rod Stewart make up for the absence of the exploding Red Road flats ? What will it say about our history and our vision for the future ? Will the 261 sporting events go according to plan ? Will the venues win architectural approval...the re-vamped stadiums, the new velodrome, the Hydro, the 700-apartment athletes village ? Will the 4,500 competitors and the 2,300 support staff and the million spectators enjoy their moment in the Glasgow sun...or the rain ? Will the tens of millions watching on television be impressed ? Will the £563m it has all cost (£200 over budget) be worth it ?

The questions may well spill over into sharp inquiries about Scotland as a whole. Is this a county on the verge of independence ? What shape are we in ? Do we have a vision for the future ? A long train journey this week to the south of England and back gave me time to read Lesley Riddoch's challenging new book, "Blossom". In it she asks if the little white rose of Scotland can blossom in the shade of the overgrown shrub called Britishness ? Her answer is: probably not.

But more importantly she argues that "independence without empowerment is a recipe for no great change." She insists pretty stridently that the debate needs to move on to the

issues of equality, local decision-making, the role of women and confidence in our own culture.

It has not really stuck me before that whatever happens on 18th September, Scotland will be a different country because of the debate we've been having over the last two years. Radicals like Lesley have forced us to address the question: what sort of nation do we want to be ? More equal ? More entrepreneurial ? More de-centralised ? More environmentally friendly ? More healthy, more active, more educated, more cultured, more responsible, more taxed ? For what it's worth, my answer to all of the above is Yes.

Mind you, compared with most of the 70 countries in the Commonwealth and the 200 countries in the world, Scotland is in a fortunate position. We did have an airliner brought down over our heads by terrorists a few years back but we have not had a civil war for some time. We have not been invaded for even longer. We are not having to fight for our independence, we can simply vote for it. We are among the 20 richest nations on the planet. This week we learned that our economy is growing at 2.6 per cent a year and a record 2.59 million of us are in work.

It's just a pity that unemployment has also risen (to 6.9 per cent because of students coming onto the market) and wages have only risen by 0.7 per cent. The Tories seem to have succeeded in cutting back the public sector, from 26 per cent of the workforce in 2010 to 21 per cent today but we have paid the price for their success with under-employment and falling living standards. Some 17 per cent of Scottish workers are earning below the living wage.

Before we return to the Games, I would like to have one more moan. Why is the Westminster government giving a loan guarantee of £230m to Ineos, the owner of the Grangemouth oil refinery ? If oil is such a strong industry you would think it could raise the investment for a new storage tank from the

money markets without government guarantees. And it's not as if it's a storage tank for "Scotland's oil", it's for American shale oil squeezed from the earth by fracking. I wonder, if there is an independent Scottish government after 18th September, if it would offer a loan guarantee of £230m to renewable companies struggling to raise funds for wave and tide power projects.

But to the Games: I wish Glasgow 2014 all the very best on Wednesday and beyond. It may be more of a turning point for our nation than we think. Big questions are being asked of us.