

Letter from Scotland



The end of the Festival is always a sad time for me. It marks the end of the summer. On Sunday night I'll be climbing Blackford Hill as usual to watch Edinburgh Castle being "blown up" by 400,000 fireworks. Goodbye to all the fun of the fair, all those sunny days – especially this year – and all the triumphs of the summer; the Homecoming, the Bannockburn celebrations, the Commonwealth Games and the Festival itself.

This year, the 67th, looks like being another box-office record. The Fringe broke the two-million ticket barrier, with over 3,000 shows. The official Festival staged over 50 concerts and the money is still being counted. The Book Festival hosted over 800 authors. The Jazz Festival saw ticket sales soar by 40 per cent. Even the Festival of Politics, with more than 60 speakers, had a good year, as well it might with only a few weeks to go before D-Day, the big Decision Day.

And so we turn to serious September. The Prime Minister came north on Thursday to remind us how serious this referendum is. He spoke about the importance of "the single market" ...not Europe, the United Kingdom. But as he was speaking at a business dinner in Glasgow, prominent Scottish business leaders – on opposite sides of the independence debate – were trying to out-do each other at letter-writing.

The No side produced a letter with 130 signatures. The Yes side followed the next day with 200 signatures. Business folk, academics, actors, footballers, even church ministers have been "coming out" all week on one side or the other. The nation is in fervent debate with itself.

On Monday evening, Alex Salmond and Alistair Darling staged the second of their live television debates – this time with the help of the BBC and the echo-chamber at Kelvingrove Museum

in Glasgow. It turned out to be even more of a shouting match than the first debate with both men speaking over each other a lot of the time. In the circumstances, there could be no clear winner, though for some reason the media declared Mr Salmond the victor on points.

What did emerge was that both men had an answer of sorts on the key questions. Mr Salmond gave us the clearest account so far of his plan B for the currency in an independent Scotland. It is to use the pound sterling without any formal currency union and not shoulder any of the accumulated UK government debt. Mr Darling admitted he couldn't go any further on more powers for the Scottish Parliament in the event of a No vote because the political parties differ on the details. But he said they would include more tax powers and more control over welfare payments.

On the NHS, Mr Darling seemed fairly relaxed about the privatisation of the service in England – saying it could not happen in Scotland because health is already a devolved issue. But Mr Salmond insisted a smaller public sector in England would cut Scotland's budget and put pressure on the NHS here.

On the slippery question of oil, the two men traded various expert estimates of what tax revenues would be in the future and both quoted selective years of what they had been in the past. But to Mr Darling's question of what happens to Scottish government spending in the bad years for oil revenues, Mr Salmond said he would establish a stabilisation fund.

Both men declared they wanted the same " fairer, more prosperous Scotland " but, curiously, neither brought any new announcements – or even catch phrases – to the debate. The star of the show was a man in the audience who asked Mr Darling: " If we're better together, why aren't we better together now ?" It's an intriguing question, rather like the question – is the glass half full or half empty ?

Mr Darling could have replied; "We ARE better together now", only that would not have sounded too convincing in this age of austerity with public service cuts and standstill wages. Wisely, Mr Salmond just let the question hang in the air – happy to let the referendum campaign sound more like a general election in which everyone is against austerity and the parties that promote it.

In short, there was a kind of fishy air that surrounded the debate. And the image that unfortunately remains with me as I look ahead to 18th September is of the load of fish heads and guts that spilled onto the road in Peterhead on Tuesday. A stomach-turning 11 tonnes of codswallop were left lying on the pavement when a lorry turned over and lost its lid.

Let's hope the referendum campaign doesn't turn any dirtier than this.