

Letter from Scotland



The swirling gannets of the
Bass Rock

“They’re like a cliff of seagulls.” I’ve never forgotten the colourful phrase Donald Dewar once used to describe the hollering on the opposition benches in parliament. It just captures the whirling excitement, the screeching disapproval, the mocking laughter of row on row of angry politicians.

I was reminded of this when I took a boat trip to the Bass Rock this week to see the gannets. The noise – and it has to be said, the smell – of 150,000 hollering gannets is overwhelming. They swooped around our boat and clouded the air above the rock. They made their point from every crevice and ledge. This is a democracy, so every one must have his say.

It has to be admitted that the birds are making better use of the rock than we humans ever did. It’s been a hermit’s cell, a castle and a prison for anyone the king didn’t like and, in Cromwell’s time, the Covenanters. The last humans abandoned the rock in 1988 when the Northern Lighthouse Board automated the Stevenson lighthouse. Since then it has become home to the largest colony of gannets on any rock anywhere in the world. They could declare independence if they wanted to.

Back on land, this is what the Scottish Parliament did at its last session on Thursday before the referendum on 18th September. The vote was 61 to 47. Alex Salmond had been in jolly mood since his outing to Arbroath on Monday when he renewed the 14th century declaration. The new “Declaration of Opportunity” replaces “freedom, which no honest man gives up but with life itself” with an opportunity to defend the NHS, create a fairer Scotland and give a reason for young Scots to stay here.

The No campaign, by contrast, was taking a cold shower of what they would call "reality." Alistair Darling submitted himself to the latest craze for being deluged with buckets of cold water, presumably to illustrate the cold predictions of the bankers and rating agencies for the pound in an independent Scotland.

It appears, dear reader, that I was wrong last week about the death of Ferguson's shipyard, the last non-naval shipyard on the Clyde. Its 70 workers are now hopeful that businessman Jim McColl will save the yard. It's remarkable and praiseworthy that the owners of the local bus company McGill's were prepared to be white knights if no one else came forward.

But while businesses may be saved, people cannot live forever and this week were the surgeon-politician Sam Galbraith and the folk singer Jean Redpath. The gaunt figure of Sam Galbraith stalked the first years of the Scottish Parliament as a no-nonsense education secretary. But he'd had an earlier career as a neurosurgeon and had his own struggle with ill-health as the world's longest surviving lung transplant patient.

Jean Redpath was a transatlantic folk deva who began life in Fife where, she said, she learnt no Scottish songs at school. It was only when she went to join the heady world of Greenwich Village in New York in the 1960s that she developed the Scottish song writing and song singing that has endeared her to audiences on both sides of the Atlantic ever since.

Someone who could have died several times over is Sir Chris Bonington. But no, he turned up this week at the age of 80 to re-climb the Old Man of Hoy. He first pioneered the route up this terrifying sea stack off Orkney 48 years ago.

I wonder what the cliff of seagulls made of that.

