

Letter from Scotland



Mibbes aye, mibbes naw.
Scotland's date with
destiny.

Thank goodness for football. Like that scene from the trenches in the First World War, both sides in the referendum battle called a truce for an hour on Wednesday and played football. The No side won, but we won't dwell on that. And a lot of money was raised for charity.

So if we are witnessing the break up of Britain, then it is being done in a gentlemanly manner and in some excitement. The latest opinion poll from YouGov puts the two sides only 6 per cent apart (47 per cent Yes and 53 per cent No). Many Labour supporters are believed to be switching to the Yes camp.

The Prime Minister is said to be getting anxious. The bookmakers are shortening the odds on a Yes victory. The investment houses are getting worried. The Labour leader Ed Miliband was in Lanarkshire this week to offer the Scots a new contract – support Labour and the Union and get the promise of a higher minimum wage, a freeze on energy prices, more taxes on the super-rich and an end to the bedroom tax.

Meanwhile, the SNP's Nicola Sturgeon has predicted that there will be a surprise victory for the Yes camp, just as there was for the SNP at the Scottish elections in 2011.

Certainly, the autumn air is becoming a little more bracing. As I cycle around town, particularly in the ex-council estates, I see more and more Saltires and Yes posters. They say the shadowlands of the internet are becoming more confrontational. Churchmen are warning against bitter personal attacks. Labour's Jim Murphy was pelted with eggs when he

visited Kirkcaldy. He called off his 100-town tour for a few days to allow tempers to cool.

In the press, the sniping continues. Retired general Sir Richard Shirreff says an independent Scotland is unlikely to be admitted into NATO. But retired NATO ambassador Dame Margaret Leslie says we would be welcomed with open arms (if we can use that term.) Retired chancellor of the exchequer Alistair Darling says unstable oil revenues would result in a £6bn shortfall in Scottish government revenues. The SNP's energy minister Fergus Ewing says there would be an oil stabilisation fund.

But all the time the Proclaimers song "Cap in Hand" climbs in the internet down-load charts. "I can't understand/ Why we let someone else rule our land/Cap in hand."

But we had a reminder this week that Scotland is connected to the rest of the world, whatever our constitutional status. One of the western hostages being held by the Islamic State in northern Iraq is originally from Scotland. The aid worker, who is not being named at the request of his family, is being threatened with death.

And, on the other side of the conflict, a Glasgow woman Aqsa Mahmood has apparently become a fervent supporter of the Islamic State after being "radicalised" and marrying one of the Jihadists. She's said to have been sending text messages urging British Muslims to carry out terrorists attacks on the British state. Her family in Glasgow went on television to say their daughter had been brainwashed into betraying them and their community in Scotland.

But there have been happier moments for Scotland this week. We've been celebrating the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Forth Road Bridge, one of the wonders of the world when I was a boy. We have since abused it, of course, loading it with twice as much traffic as it was designed to carry.

Unsurprisingly, it's beginning to creak, so we've set about building another bridge. We've since discovered that the rotting cables can be dried out but we've started the new bridge and I suppose we must finish it.

Our other achievement of the week was to win a place in the European team for golf's premier competition, the Ryder Cup. Stephen Gallagher from Bathgate will follow in his uncle's footsteps onto the green turf of Gleneagles later this month...when all the referendum rantin' is over. Thank goodness for golf.

