

Letter from Scotland



Jolly golfing weather

With the referendum over, we're all off to play golf...or at least watch it, as the best golfers in Europe and America play for The Ryder Cup at Gleneagles. Ever since Mary Queen of Scots took a swipe at a ball on the links at Musselburgh in 1567, Scotland has been mad about golf.

Well, ten per cent of us have – mostly men and mostly middle class. But to try to dispel the image of golf being for gentlemen only, Alex Salmond pulled on his baseball cap on Wednesday and strode onto the fairway at Gleneagles to announce an extra £1m for Golfclub Initiative, a scheme which has introduced 350,000 children of all classes to golf over the last ten years. Stephen Gallacher, the only Scot in the Ryder Cup tournament, was at a local club in Linlithgow the other day helping at just such a children's event.

To be fair, Scotland is the only country I've heard of which tries to make golf a sport for all. We have 593 golf clubs, most of which don't charge a fortune in membership fees. Many of our golf courses are municipally owned. According to SportScotland, 16 per cent of golfers come from poor households. And all but a handful of clubs are open to women members, the Royal and Ancient at St Andrews being a recent convert to this revolutionary idea.

And of course, golf makes us a lot of money. The industry is said to generate £1bn a year for the Scottish economy and 20,000 jobs. It's thought £100m will be spent during the Ryder Cup alone, much of it at Gleneagles...not that most of the 45,000 daily crowd will get anywhere near the hotel's blazer-guarded doors.

Out on the political fairway, everyone is waiting to see if the victorious unionist parties can fulfil their “vow” to deliver more powers to The Scottish Parliament before the General Election in May next year. Lord Smith, the man who brought us the successful Commonwealth Games, has been charged with bringing the parties together to hammer out the details. But we still don't quite know how closely the whole deal will be linked to devolution in England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

There are two crucial points, it seems to me. One is that the funding formula written on the blackboard by Lord Barnett will have to be reconfigured. And the Labour Party will have to bite the bullet of being a minority (for the moment) in an England-only parliament. But no doubt we shall be hearing more about these tricky issues in the months ahead.

For now, we are watching a change of leadership in the SNP. Nicola Sturgeon is still expected to be crowned Alex Salmond's successor at the party conference in November. And the post of deputy leader is being contested – at the time of writing – by Keith Brown and Stewart Hosie. Intriguingly, the SNP's membership has more than doubled since referendum day, to 62,000, and all of this new model army will be allowed to vote. Scottish Greens too have seen their membership rise from around 1,500 to 5,000 in the last week, presumably as a reward for their participation in the Yes campaign.

So, far from plunging into a post-referendum depression, Scotland seems to be becoming a happier place. We learnt this week from the Office of National Statistics that we are happier now than we were three years ago. On average, Scots are giving themselves a score of seven out of ten as the economy improves, anxiety levels go down and satisfaction with life increases.

It appears our only enemy now is the Chinese mitten crab. This horrid creature, the size of a dinner plate, has been found in

Scotland for the first time, in the River Clyde. If it spreads, scientists say, it could devastate salmon and trout fishing in our rivers and cause widespread erosion of our river banks. All sightings of these alien invaders have to be reported to the Scottish Environment Protection Agency whose officers will enter the water shouting "exterminate, exterminate, exterminate."