

Letter from Scotland



The winding road to autumn

We are now into the season of mists and mellow fruitfulness. Low sunshine is lighting up the yellowing trees. The days are getting cooler, the wind more insistent. Scotland has had a blissfully mild and dry September, the second driest since 1910, with only 33.3mm of rain, about 20 per cent of the usual. I've been out walking in the hills and moors around Loch Lomond and it's been a real pleasure to camp and picnic without being bothered by midgies.

I noticed too that the muirburning season has started and this year it's the subject of new controversy. A study by researchers at Leeds University on the peat moors of the Pennines has found that the traditional practice of burning patches of heather to encourage grouse breeding causes more environmental damage than was previously thought. It not only causes peat bogs to dry out, it raises the long-term soil temperature, reducing the number of plants and animals able to grow there, and it increases the risk of flooding.

Conservationists have already been campaigning against muirburning on upland blanket bog which covers nearly a quarter of Scotland's land area. But the game-keepers say the city-reared conservationists are panicking unnecessarily and that controlled burning of the heather keeps moors fresh and healthy and prevents wildfires which would be even more damaging to the environment.

As may be imagined in this much-divided country, muirburning was not the only controversy this week. Alex Salmond divided opinion when he announced in parliament on Thursday that he would be granting an amnesty to those who had not paid Mrs Thatcher's poll tax. Apparently local government finance

officers have been combing through the latest electoral register – full of new voters keen to participate in the referendum – looking for those who, 20 years ago, couldn't or wouldn't pay £400m worth of local tax.

This reminder of the Thatcher years is only one of several SNP arrows flying through the air towards Westminster. And it's a sign that we are already into the run-up to the general election which will take place in May next year. You would think after two years of referendum campaigning, there would be a closed season, or at least a time for reflection. But no, everything now has to be viewed through the prism of the looming Westminster elections.

The Westminster parties have been holding their annual conferences, Labour promising a fairer deal for working families, the Conservatives promising tax cuts. No one though is saying much about the continuing austerity programme – currently planned to cut £25bn from welfare and public services over the next two years. And not many helpful suggestions are being made about a solution to the West Lothian question...why should Scottish MPs vote on purely English matters ?

Meanwhile, Lord Smith is locking eight politicians – two from each party – into a prison ship somewhere down the Clyde to try to get them to agree on more devolved powers to Holyrood. They have until St Andrew's Day (30th November) or they will all be deported to Catalonia.

This week the great Scottish public have forced the authorities into another retreat...and without having to turn out in their thousands – as they do in Catalonia or Hong Kong. The new centralised police authority, Police Scotland, has yielded to public pressure to keep its guns off the streets. Earlier this year we were all shocked to learn that several hundred police officers were carrying guns on routine patrol. That practice will now be abandoned and the chief constable

Sir Stephen House says armed officers will only be dispatched to serious incidents where firearms or a threat to life is involved.

Finally, the people of Orkney have had one of their heroes recognised at last by the great and the good at Westminster Abbey. On Wednesday, the Dean unveiled a plaque to the memory of Dr John Rae, a surgeon with the Hudson Bay Company, who discovered the North West Passage through the Canadian ice-fields 160 years ago. He was denied any recognition by the Victorians because he let slip the unpalatable fact that the crew of a previous expedition, led by an Englishman Sir John Franklin, had resorted to cannibalism in a vain attempt to survive.

I don't know if cannibalism in such circumstances is a good or a bad thing, but I do know that inconvenient truths are often hard to swallow.