

Letter from Scotland



On the right track ?

So, Scotland's railways are to be run by a state-owned company after all. But the state concerned is not Scottish or even British, but Dutch. The awarding of the ScotRail franchise to Abellio, a subsidiary of the Dutch national railways, has caused a few surprised glances across the railway carriages of Scotland. Supporters of the existing franchise operator, the privately owned First Group of Aberdeen, have been folding their newspapers away in disgust.

At First Minister's question time Alex Salmond was accused of selling Scotland out. The Labour Party leader Johann Lamont said profits made here should be re-invested in Scotland and not going to support the rail network in The Netherlands. She urged him to put the decision on hold till next year to allow time for a full review of rail services in the light of the further powers being devolved to the Scottish Parliament from Westminster.

But Mr Salmond said Abellio had offered a good deal for the £6bn contract over the next ten years. There would be a quarter more carriages, a third more seats, faster journey times between the main cities, a fleet of 80 new electric trains and 27 refurbished diesel trains and, most importantly he said, Abellio was going to pay at least the living wage (£7.65 an hour) to all its employees, including sub-contractors.

As this news was being debated by the political passengers at Holyrood, work was beginning on laying the track for the new Borders railway. The 90,000 sleepers along the 30 miles between Edinburgh and Tweedbank (near Galashiels) are already in place and the project is said to be on time and on budget.

The line is due to open in September next year at a cost of £350m.

And would you believe it, the Edinburgh Trams have won this year's Light Rail Award. It's been given by the rail industry to Edinburgh chief executive Sue Bruce and transport convenor Lesley Hinds for getting the trouble-plagued project back on track. There seems to be a prize for everything these days.

I wonder if the Finance Secretary John Swinney will get an award for his latest budget announced to parliament on Thursday. It included the first specifically Scottish taxes for 308 years. There's to be a Land and Buildings Transaction Tax to replace the old Stamp Duty. It will start at 2 per cent on properties over £135,000 and rise to 12 per cent on properties costing over a million pounds. There's also to be a Scottish Landfill Tax which will mirror the existing tax of £82.60 a tonne.

Elsewhere in the budget, Mr Swinney has increased NHS spending to £12bn a year. There's to be £390m to build 6,000 affordable homes immediately. In the longer term, using Scotland's new borrowing powers, there will be a fund of £4.5bn for new colleges, schools and health clinics. Childcare will get an extra £300m over the next two years. "A budget for growth and fairness" Mr Swinney called it. Labour and the Conservatives said the 1 per cent extra being given to the NHS was not enough to protect it from real cuts due to rising costs.

Two ministers who did not win prizes this week are the justice secretary Kenny MacAskill and the education secretary Mike Russell. Mr MacAskill only just survived a no-confidence motion over his handling of the new police authority, Police Scotland. It was forced into a retreat over police officers carrying guns on routine patrol. As if we didn't have enough guns in Scotland, with figures out this week showing there are nearly 100,000 firearm certificates currently on issue, an increase of 44 per cent over the last decade. The number of

gun dealers is up a third.

Mr Russell was forced to admit to MSPs that there has been too much testing of pupils under the new exam system. But he said lessons would be learned (sic) and, meanwhile, teachers and pupils had to "keep the heid."

One man who had to keep the heid on Tuesday night was the captain of a ship carrying nuclear waste from Dounreay to Antwerp. A fire on board knocked his engines out and he found his ship drifting towards an oil platform off the Caithness coast. The 52 workers on the platform had to be evacuated and the ship was towed to sheltered waters in the Moray Firth. This Captain Nuke is now facing all sorts of questions and so too are the nuclear regulators.

Happily, I spent last weekend far away from Dounreay and its nuclear waste ships. I was on a Scout expedition, finishing off the last two legs of the West Highland Way – Glencoe to Fort William. We escaped most of the rain but we could not escape the humiliation of being overtaken by the 417 runners of the Glencoe Marathon. It's said to be the toughest marathon in Britain – up the punishing Devil's Staircase out of Glencoe, then down into Kinlochleven and through the Mamores into Glen Nevis.

How anyone can run 26 miles, and over such rocky paths, wet with recent rain, I just don't know. The winner, Kevin O'donoghue, did it in 3 hours 34 minutes. The first woman home wasn't far behind, Joanne Thom in 3 hours 48 minutes. These supermen and superwomen leave us all standing in our tracks....which is where we began.