

Letter from Scotland



Record numbers of pink-footed geese at Montrose Basin (photo courtesy of SWT's Harry Bickerstaff)

Look at who's blown in on the wild west winds we've been having for the last few days... 78,970 pink-footed geese, according to the bird counters at the Scottish Wildlife Trust's reserve at Montrose Basin. It's a record number, possibly because of the wind-assisted passage they've had this year from Iceland and Greenland.

In contrast, one poor little hermit thrush from America has been blown across the Atlantic against his will by hurricane Gonzalo and is trying to hid from the twitchers in North Uist. He's only the 13th hermit thrush ever recorded in Britain.

What remained of the hurricane went on the cause further inconvenience along Scotland's west coast on Tuesday. Winds of 88 mph caused ferry services to be cancelled, roads and bridges closed, power lines to come down and many islanders were forced to become hermits themselves and have some sympathy for their new American friend.

Back on the sheltered east coast, the devo-meisters were beginning work on that "Vow" to give the Scottish Parliament more powers. They sat smiling for the cameras around a large table, the chairman Lord Smith and two representatives from each of the parties – the SNP, Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats and the Greens. Lord Smith assured us afterwards that the atmosphere had been constructive and that important principles had been agreed, among them that the Scottish talks were not to be linked, or held up in any way, by parallel discussions in England about "English votes for English laws"

or the further powers proposed for Wales and Northern Ireland.

Everything must now be seen, of course, through the prism of the UK general election, only six months away now. Perhaps it's not surprising then to see the economic figures improving. Growth is up to 2.6 per cent, while inflation is well under control at 1.2 per cent. Unemployment is down to 5.5 per cent in Scotland and 6 per cent across the UK. Less impressive is the youth unemployment rate of 22 per cent for young men and 11 per cent for young women. And much less impressive is average pay, only up by 0.9 per cent this year which has meant a real cut in living standards for the sixth year running.

The figures have led to an anguished debate about who has paid the price for the bankers' crash. It's been the young and the low-paid.

This week we've had to get used to being an environmentally-friendly country. A new 5p charge has been introduced on every plastic bag issued by shops and super-markets. We are catching up with Wales and Northern Ireland where a plastic-bag-levy has led to an 80 per cent fall in the number of bags strewn around the countryside and along their beautiful beaches. Apparently we Scots use 800 million carrier bags every year – more per head than any other part of the UK – and most of them we just throw away.

The bag makers – the Carrier Bag Consortium- have tried to confuse the issue by asking awkward questions about how the new levy is to be policed, where the 5p charge will go and which bags exactly are subject to the charge. But such details were quickly wrapped up and disposed of by the plastic bag police. Local authority environment health departments will follow up any reports of abuse. The proceeds from the 5p charge will go towards environmental charities. And the charge applies to all disposable bags with handles whether they are made of plastic or paper or any other irresponsible material.

Charging for irresponsible behaviour has been fashionable this week. Historic Scotland announced plans to levy a charge of £5 on anyone who is careless enough to wander into Glasgow Cathedral. Glaswegians have been doing this for free since the 12th century. So the announcement came as quite a shock to the City Council and the Church of Scotland who both expressed their "concern" (ie their outrage) at the suggestion.

But Historic Scotland says that someone must pay for the upkeep of fine old cathedrals. It points out that there's already a charge for visiting Iona Abbey and St Andrews Cathedral. York Minster charges £10 a head and you won't get into St Paul's Cathedral in London for less than £16.50 unless you are a very deserving case. Christ may have driven the money-changers from the temple but...Historic Scotland, that won't be so easy.