

Letter from Scotland



Heading into the storm

We are entering the season of storms. Already a lively wind is blowing about the house as I write and the forecast for the weekend is for dark clouds to sweep across the sky at 70mph. Our scout winter camp is going to be character building.

The stormy conditions have woken our politicians from their Hogmanay hibernation and they've realised there is a general election in less than 120 days' time. David Cameron appeared in front of an idyllic country-scene poster saying we should stay on his road to recovery. Ed Miliband went to gritty Salford to say "we are facing a once in a generation fight about who our country works for." As he was speaking, his Scottish lieutenant Jim Murphy was outlining a dramatic illustration of what those words actually mean.

Mr Murphy wants a future Labour government to inject a thousand more nurses into the ailing health service in Scotland. And half the money would come from Labour's new mansion tax. It didn't take long for Boris Johnson to work out that this was London subsidising the Scots yet again, since there aren't many mansion owners in Scotland. It was he said a "fiscally vindictive" measure "to mug London till the pips squeak."

The SNP meanwhile have looked and laughed at a' that mudslinging between the unionist parties. Nicolas Sturgeon went back to her old school in Ayrshire to help serve the first free school dinner to pupils in primary one to three. It's a policy now rolled out to the whole of Scotland to encourage healthy eating and save families up to £330 a year. Incidentally, a report out this week points out that the

average household in Scotland spends 11 per cent of its income on food compared with 20 per cent in 1970.

Households are also spending much less on petrol, with the price of North Sea oil dropping to around \$50 a barrel, less than half of what it was during the referendum campaign.

Everyone seems to think this is a good thing, except people living in Aberdeen and those working out the finances of an independent Scotland. No one seems to be worried about its effect on climate change or whether the price might shoot up again in a few months when the poker game between Saudi Arabia and the shale oil producers in America is over.

The directors of Rangers Football Club continued this week to play poker instead of football. They are holding us all in thrall as they play one hand after another with prospective buyers in America and South Africa and Northumberland. This is in curious contrast with the rest of Scottish professional football clubs who seem to be putting their finances in order and learning to rely on home-grown players rather than expensive imports.

On the first day of the Scottish Parliament in the new year, Nicola Sturgeon and the health secretary Shona Robison briefed MSPs on the case of the Scottish nurse struck down by the Ebola virus. Ms Sturgeon spoke of the "quiet heroism" of 39 year old Pauline Cafferkey from Blantyre who contracted the disease while working for Save the Children in Sierra Leone.

She announced that procedures for checking doctors and nurses returning from Africa are being reviewed at Heathrow and in Glasgow to see if any lessons can be learned. As I write, Ms Cafferkey remains critically ill at the Royal Free Hospital in London.

Her case is an example of how events we imagine are far away can suddenly hit us here at home. Another example is the stormy weather. We think of our storms being little more a blowy day on the sea front or some ferry disruption but the

overturning of ships is something that only happens in far off oceans. But it happened last Saturday in the Pentland Firth.

It seems the cement carrier Cemfjord was overwhelmed by stormy seas as it made its way from Denmark to Runcorn in Cheshire. The crew of eight are all missing, presumed to have gone down with their ship. They didn't even have time to send a distress signal.

Finally, let's marvel at a man who was prepared to face winds of up to 100mph and temperatures of minus 50C to ski 500 miles across the Antarctic wastes to the South Pole. Newall Hunter from Leadhills in South Lanarkshire arrived at the Pole on 4th January after 41 days alone on his skis. He now intends to climb the highest mountain in Antarctica Mt Vinson and later this year join the British-Irish expedition retracing the steps of Ernest Shackleton, but this time completing his journey to the Pole.

And I'm dreading a couple of windy nights camping in the Kielder forest !