

Letter from Scotland



We've been battening down the hatches in more senses than one this week. The usual January storms seem to have no end and no mercy and our oil lamps are running low on fuel. A perfect storm has hit our crucial oil industry. Lower prices and higher production costs are threatening 17,750 jobs, according to one estimate by the Scottish Parliament. As I write, BP is announcing 300 job losses at its offices in Aberdeen. (photo courtesy of BP p.l.c.)

This has brought all hands on deck, as the politicians seek to steady the ship, or at least apportion the blame. At first minister's question time, Labour's Kezia Dugdale pointed out that, with the price of oil plunging to less than \$50 a barrel, half its value during the halcyon days of the pre-Referendum summer, this was not the time to abandon the UK's generous Barnett formula – the calculation which determines the Scottish Parliament's block grant.

First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon struck back by accusing the UK government of mismanaging the oil industry – squandering its £300bn of tax revenues and failing to encourage new investment. And, throwing consensus to the wind, she said Labour MPs should hang their heads in shame for supporting the Conservatives in imposing £30bn more of austerity cuts on the British economy.

Earlier in the week, Ms Sturgeon was in Aberdeen to announce an energy jobs task force which will try to find alternative work for redundant oil workers and seek to keep apprentices in work or training until the price of oil comes to the surface again.

The Governor of the Bank of England Mark Carney failed to pour oil on these troubled waters when he told a Commons committee

that the UK would benefit from the lower oil price (inflation, for instance, is down to 0.5 per cent) but Scotland would suffer a “negative shock.” He expected, however, that this would be cushioned by our old friend the Barnett formula.

Storms are a time to keep close to your radio and during the week we tuned in to hear varied tales of woe from the north and west – though, even here in Edinburgh, the winds were whipping round Blackford Hill at a lively 70mph. An unfortunate 120,000 householders in the Highlands and Islands were without electricity for a time. Ferries were disrupted, some trains cancelled, schools closed. Snow blocked the A9 near Blair Atholl, leaving 17 miles of frustrated car and lorry drivers listening to their radios for hours on end.

Climate change was even worse news for our twin country in Africa. Floods have been causing havoc in the north and south of Malawi. Reports from the stricken areas say at least 48 people have been killed and 69,000 forced to leave their homes.

Scotland’s supermarkets told the Government this week that they are doing their bit to tackle climate change. The Scottish Retail Consortium say their members exceeded their targets for 2013 of cutting waste sent to landfill from 46 per cent to 6 per cent and reducing energy emissions from their premises by 30 per cent. They promised to cut carbon emissions by a further quarter over the next six years. And Edinburgh Council has declared its intention to become the first city in Scotland to introduce a [20mph speed restriction](#) on all but its main arterial roads by the end of this year.

Finally, fossil remains found on the Isle of Skye have given me hope that I might once day see the Loch Ness Monster. Palaeontologists from the University of Edinburgh say the remains belonged to a four-metre long, dolphin-like sea creature which swam in the warm waters around the Scottish coast during the Jurassic era 170 million years ago. They’ve

named it Dearmhara Shawcrossi, after the Gaelic word for sea-lizard and the man who found the fossil Brian Shawcross.

Could this be the cousin of the monster who got caught in Loch Ness as Scotland emerged from the sea, with another climate change, all those years ago ?

And are his descendants still with us ?