

Letter from Scotland



Edinburgh escaped with just a dusting of snow

The weather is playing with us again. Just when we were enjoying the snowdrops and the birdsong, along comes another bite of winter. The cold north-west wind has brought three inches of snow to much of the Highlands and Dumfries and Galloway, and a dusting to the central belt. A hundred schools have been closed. There's been a spate of minor road accidents and, in the Borders, a lady walker who strayed from the path was nearly overcome by a blizzard. After a search lasting more than three hours, she was eventually found by a rescue dog just 10 metres from the track.

The cold weather has once again highlighted our dependence on gas to heat our homes. The energy companies have been signalling a cut in our bills – but not, in most cases, till the spring – and only while world oil prices remain low. Meanwhile a frantic debate has broken out over our supplies of gas in the long term.

The Scottish government on Wednesday announced a moratorium on planning permission for all types of unconventional gas production, including fracking. The energy minister Fergus Ewing told MSPs the ban will last for as long as it takes to carry out a full assessment of the risks of pollution and earth disturbance and a public consultation exercise. It follows a vote at Westminster on Monday during which the UK government was forced to abandon its dash for fracking gas and accept 13 further environmental conditions before licences can be issued.

Fracking, of course, doesn't just split rocks deep underground, it splits public opinion and the political parties. And there was a lot of political fracking going on.

Broadly speaking, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats are gung-ho in favour of pumping water and chemicals into parts they cannot reach in the north of England and central Scotland. They say it will give Britain another oil and gas bonanza and save importing shale gas from America to supply the huge petrochemical works at Grangemouth employing 1300 people.

Labour's new leader in Scotland Jim Murphy says his newly emancipated "branch office" would ban fracking unless there was a majority of local residents in favour of it. The SNP say that's impractical. But neither Labour nor the SNP have quite had the courage to follow the Greens and ban fracking altogether.

The SNP have however found the courage this week to change their minds over prison policy. The prisons minister Michael Matheson said he'd been persuaded by the arguments in Dame Elish Angiolini's report that building one large women's prison at Greenock was not a good idea. Instead, he announced that the current and ageing prison at Cornton Vale near Stirling would be replaced with one small central prison and a series of local prisons where women with drug or mental health problems would be treated closer to their homes. And so said all the other parties.

There's been no argument either over the success of the controversial average speed cameras on Scotland's killer road, the A9. In the first three months of the trial, the number of drivers caught speeding has fallen by over 90 per cent. And there have been no deaths on the stretch of road – between Dunblane and Inverness – where the cameras are installed.

It looks like more cameras will be installed on Loch Ness, if VisitBritain has anything to do with it. The tourist agency is to spend £2m promoting Loch Ness to holiday makers throughout the world. And, of course, the Monster will be mentioned. As I explained a couple of weeks ago, scientists at Edinburgh

University have established that Nessie is a descendant of the Jurassic sea lizard and she only surfaces once every 170 million years. Not that that will stop the extra foreign tourists spending an estimated £3.5m in the hotels and cafes around the loch.

Finally, it's going to be a wonderful weekend for sport. On Sunday Andy Murray plays in the final of the Australian Open tennis tournament and Celtic meet a team called Rangers in the League Cup semi-final at Hampden. It's the first time Rangers have met their old rival since they fell into financial disgrace three years ago. This week, the club mended its books with a loan of £10m from the owner of the Sports Direct group Mike Ashley but, alas, not to everyone's satisfaction.

We shall see whether it makes a difference to the players ...unless of course the weather decides to take part in the game.