

# Letter from Scotland

✘ So, the Clydesiders have delivered. The final accounts are in. The Commonwealth Games in Glasgow managed to stay within budget, by a safe £37m according to the Auditor General. This was in happy contrast to the Olympic Games in London in 2012 which cost four times their original budget.

The canny Scot in charge was Lord Smith of Kelvin, the businessman who went on to chair the latest devolution commission. The Auditor General's report praises the Glasgow Games' "strong controls and good planning" and assures us that there are "clear legacy plans in place." Whether there is enough public money around to make them a reality remains to be seen.

The whole show cost the taxpayer £424m but it did give us a fortnight of high excitement last summer. Over 98 per cent of the tickets were sold, Scotland won a record 53 medals and it's left us with several world-class sports venues and a Games Village of 700 new homes. Much needed, as we shall see.

The accounts for Scotland as a whole make less pleasant reading. The government's expenditure and revenue figures (GERS) show there was a deficit of £12.4 billion in 2013-14 or 8.1 per cent of national income. That compares to a UK deficit of 5.6 per cent and, according to the unionist parties, shows that Scotland does rather well out of the United Kingdom, to the tune of £1,200 a head every year in extra government spending.

The SNP reply that when oil revenues are taken into account, Scotland pays £400 more in tax per head than the rest of the UK and therefor deserves the extra spending. Besides, says Nicola Sturgeon, if Scotland were independent, its economy would grow faster and we'd all be debt free and better off.

Has this got anything to do with the General Election ? Of

course not. It's just that the SNP are riding high in the opinion polls and the other parties are desperately throwing figures around to try to derail the yellow and black bandwagon heading for Westminster. The Conservatives have even brought out a poster showing a large Alex Salmond with a wee David Miliband sticking out of his breast pocket.

Scottish politicians have been careful not to mention the issue of immigration which I gather is a touchy subject in England. Only 7 per cent of Scots are foreign-born, compared to 13 per cent in England but the gap is closing with some 20,000 immigrants arriving here every year, many from Poland. The BBC commissioned a poll from YouGov last week which found that 64 per cent of Scots wanted to see less immigration and more than half thought that employers should give British-born applicants preference over immigrant workers. This of course is in contrast to what many employers and politicians are saying, quietly, – namely, that Scotland needs more immigrants to help the economy grow and support our ageing population.

Scotland's increasing population also means more homes are needed – 8,000 more “affordable” homes for rent every year, according to one estimate. The recession and government cuts has meant we have fallen way behind this target in the last ten years and this week a former Auditor General, Robert Black, drew attention to the social effects of this housing crisis. Some 73,000 families are living in over-crowded conditions, one in ten homes are affected by damp, and over a quarter of households are living in fuel poverty ie spending more than 10 per cent of their income on heating bills. This, said Mr Black, is a health time bomb waiting to go off. The Scottish government says it's well aware of this and has built 24,000 “affordable” homes in the last three years.

Scotland's been blown about and drenched by a fair bit of wind and rain recently. Last weekend was particularly bad, 160mm of rain falling in just 36 hours in parts of the Highlands. Of course that was when my Scout hill-walking group decided to

have a day out in Glencoe. We settled for the woods around Callander instead ! Here we came across the dramatic Bracklinn Falls, where the River Keltie was tumbling through the gorge with alarming force.

A party of river kayakers were staring down into the river wondering whether to attempt the rapids or not. They eventually decided that discretion was the better part of valour. We thought "chicken." But later in the day, we found them all kitted up in wetsuits ready to shoot the rapids further up the glen and, who knows, to drop down through the falls at the end of the run. Our respect for them grew. But we didn't have the patience to stand there in the rain and wait for them to launch their boats. We were heading for a tea shop in Callander where, over cream scones, we contemplated our own "discretion" and learned not to judge others too quickly.