

Letter from Scotland

✘ Ancient peoples believed that a solar eclipse was a sign from the gods. Were they displeased with events on Earth? Were they warning us to change our ways? We now know it's nothing to do with us.....or is it? On the one hand, it's just an event of nature that comes around about four times a year, though the last time it was visible in Britain was in 1999 and the next time will be 2026. On the other hand, it's a reminder that we rather rely on the Sun. Even its slow blink on Friday morning was a slightly chilling experience.

It's better to be in a crowd when the gods are angry. So I went down to the Scottish Parliament where there was some sort of official public viewing of the event organised by the Astronomy Society and the parliament's "solar eclipse staff" (to quote from their identity badges). I found five or six hundred people, all with their faces lifted towards the south-eastern sky, watching for the sun to appear over Arthur's Seat. And it duly turned up, on time, and without much cloud cover.

Then the Moon came stealing across its face, reducing the Sun to a crescent which tipped one way and then the other, turning from yellow to red and back to yellow. Professional sky-watchers had their telescope reflectors, amateurs had their cards or box cameras, the rest of us shared plastic viewing glasses or only looked when the occasional cloud drifted across the show. The Earth did not go dark, just a little duskish and cooler. But there was magic in the air, the crowd murmured, even gasped from time to time. It was a demonstration of nature's "shock and awe", and we all knew it.

But even the movement of the stars was not allowed to overshadow our general election campaign, now into its last 40-odd days. On Wednesday the Chancellor George Osborne sought to turn the election into a "historic" event with a budget

speech which recalled the glories of the English victory over “an ill-judged alliance between the champion of a united Europe and a renegade force of Scottish nationalists” at the Battle of Agincourt in 1415. He’s to spend a million pounds of our tax-money on the 600th anniversary celebrations on St Crispin’s Day later this year. I wonder if the SNP will agree to this if they are the king-makers after May 7th.

On the other hand the Chancellor came to the rescue of Scotland with a £1.3 billion package of measures to help the North Sea oil industry. No one, it seems, had foreseen that the oil price would drop from over \$100 a barrel to less than \$50 in the last few months, leaving the industry sinking beneath the waves. Nicola Sturgeon, at first minister’s question time, admitted that she, along with the UK Treasury and the Department of Energy, had got it wrong.

The Chancellor also handed Scotland £3 billion over the next 20 years for his Scottish version of the “powerhouses” of the north, the cities of Aberdeen and Inverness. He also poured out a 2 per cent cut in the duty on whisky. But as Ms Sturgeon pointed out, the Westminster austerity programme will continue whether the Tories or Labour win the election, unless the SNP can block them. Instead of a £30bn cut in public services, she wants a £180bn expansion, arguing that that will get the economy growing fast enough not to add to the national debt in the long run.

But if the oil and gas industry is getting a boost in the north, it’s still not clear what will happen in central Scotland. The Scottish government has put off a decision on fracking and “unconventional gas” until after the general election. But this week Ineos, the company which owns the Grangemouth refinery and most of the exploration licences, has launched a publicity campaign to win over local support for the controversial drilling and pumping operations. It’s offered to give 6 per cent of the revenues to the affected communities, worth an estimated £2.5bn over the next 15 years.

Ineos argues that fracked gas releases less carbon than conventional gas but it's still not clear to me how this fits in with the government's plan to reduce Scotland's carbon footprint. In fact the footprint is already starting to grow again, at over 5 per cent a year, after a decade in decline.

Global warming isn't all bad news of course. Huge tuna fish are apparently being attracted to the warmer seas off the Hebrides. Captain Angus Campbell has appeared on American TV catching a 500lb monster. This week he announced he is to collaborate with the University of the Highlands and Marine Scotland to track the movement of these mighty creatures more usually found in the Pacific Ocean. The arrival of the bluefin tuna is also welcome evidence that herring and mackerel stocks are beginning to recover after years of over-fishing.

On Tuesday night I happened to be cycling through the Grassmarket in Edinburgh when I became a little confused. There were crowds of young, slightly tipsy people about, all dressed in green with Guinness top hats on. Were they celebrating Celtic's victory in the League Cup last weekend or were they rugby fans arriving early for the Scotland-Ireland game this weekend ? Then I remembered to was St Patrick's Day.

I wonder what St Patrick would have made of the events of Friday morning. In his 5th century view of the world, would we be pagan sun-worshippers or Christian pilgrims looking for a sign from heaven that all will be well?

Or would he have grabbed a pair of those viewing glasses from a member the Scottish Parliament's "solar eclipse staff", looked though them briefly and said: "Begorrah"?