

Letter from Scotland



Forty years ago the new Longannet power station was a big story for me. I was an apprentice journalist on the Alloa Advertiser and the great white chimney stacks marked the eastern edge of our territory. Long-gannet (its proper local pronunciation) (YAY! Somebody finally knows how to say it! Ed.) was providing jobs, meeting almost half of Scotland's electricity needs, and of course throwing up the occasional newsworthy dispute over wages or contractors' conditions.

How the world has changed. Now it's an old-fashioned puffing Billy, earmarked for closure next year. Its 270 workers are being laid off, along with another 700 contractors. Its coal burning furnaces, once in the centre of a honeycomb of coalfields, are no longer in keeping with our zero-carbon future. Its carbon capture experiment hasn't worked and its facing a £40m transmission charge to connect to the National Grid.

Of course, there are complaints over the unfairness of it all. But, like it or not, the reign of King Coal is coming to an end. Longannet was due to close in 2020 anyway. To be replaced by..... ? And therein lies a tale. Wind farms are already able to generate enough energy to meet Scotland's electricity needs, but only when the wind blows.

The SNP government has set its face against renewing our two nuclear power stations. The gas-fired power station at Peterhead, with its carbon capture project, has just won a supply contract with the National Grid and there is word of another gas fired power station at the old coal powered station at Cockerzie. And there's word too that we might be able to buy electricity down the inter-connector from England on a quiet day. But it's all a bit scary and politically

very highly charged.

Not that politics is playing a large part in our lives these days ! We have no MPs, for instance. The Westminster parliament has been "prorogued" and will "dissolve" on Monday. The election campaign proper will then begin. The Conservatives have not waited for that formality, bringing out an entertaining video of Alex Salmond piping a tune for Ed Miliband to dance to. David Cameron followed that up with a promise not to increase VAT if he's re-elected for his second and, as we now know, his last term as prime minister.

Labour meanwhile have said they will have no truck with the SNP, even after the election, and their Scottish leader Jim Murphy unveiled a £1bn package of measures to tackle youth unemployment to be paid for by a further tax on bankers bonuses. The SNP, who hold their spring conference in Glasgow this weekend, are making an end to "austerity" a condition for supporting a Labour government.

MSPs at Holyrood were getting pretty excited on Thursday with all this Westminster politics happening around them and the first minister Nicola Sturgeon faced some awkward questions on the so-called "black holes" in the SNP's policy of "full fiscal autonomy" ie Scotland raising all its public spending through its own taxes. She said Scotland couldn't do much worse than it has done under the "austerity cuts" imposed by the Tories and supported by Labour.

She didn't have far to look for figures to support her argument that there is too wide a gulf between the rich and the poor in Scotland. Official figures out this week show that the richest 10 per cent of Scots own almost half the wealth and a third of Scots have no savings or private pensions. Another survey from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that while child poverty and pensioner poverty have diminished over the last 10 years, the lot of young people (under 30) has got much worse.

Ms Sturgeon had another important duty to perform this week – as did David Cameron – and that was to apologize to the victims of the contaminated blood tragedy. Lord Penrose has taken six years and £12m to produce a report into the use of blood products by the NHS in the 1970s and 80s which had not been screened for HIV and hepatitis C. It's thought that 2,500 patients in Scotland have been affected, and many thousands across the UK. Lord Penrose came to the conclusion that no one was to blame since these diseases were new at the time and tests for them had not been developed. His only recommendation was that patients who were given transfusions or blood products before 1991 should now be offered tests by their GPs.

There were cries of "whitewash" from the victims and their families and some of them set Lord Penrose's 1800 page report on fire outside the press conference in Edinburgh. David Cameron offered £25m of extras funds for the charities supporting the victims and the Scottish health secretary Shona Robison pledged similar financial support.

The winter dealt us one final blow this week. In strong, icy cold winds, a tour-bus was blown down an embankment on the A83 road at the Rest-and-Be-Thankful pass. It only just avoided slipping into Loch Restil. Twenty three passengers were badly injured and 20 others were described as "walking wounded."

But now hopefully we are on the way to summer. This weekend sees us adjusting our clocks for the beginning of British Summer Time. The "winter of our discontent" is over, to quote Richard III who is finally going to his grave in Leicester Cathedral as I write. Spring is certainly in the air and there's talk of polar bears and pandas producing cubs here in Scotland. How the world is changing.