

Letter from Scotland



Firing up the election
campaign

Hailstones fell. A cold wind blew. Dark clouds flew. You could tell...this was a Scottish spring. The only warm spot was our fire. We piled on the old gorse bushes and bramble in the last burning session before the Easter holidays. We've spent the last few weeks clearing an overgrown field at the wildlife reserve beneath Arthur's Seat where I volunteer every Tuesday. We hope to have cattle here shortly to help us create, or re-create, a traditional flower meadow.

This is a place with the alarming name of "Murder Acre." In 1677, a dispute between the Trades Association and Edinburgh Town Guard got out of control and the King's Troops were called in to quell a crowd of 2,000 demonstrators. The Dragoons began by shooting a woman who was watching proceedings from the top of a nearby fence. And as the crowd ran away across our field, they were shot in the back. History does not tell us how many died. They did not trouble with public inquiries in the 17th century.

That's how they did politics then. So we have come a long way. We still get the odd demonstration, an occasional riot (in England anyway), a few police charges on horseback, some day-long strikes but, generally, we now decide things by TV debates and the ballot box.

By the time you read this we will all be scoring how the seven party leaders performed in the ITV debate yesterday evening. In the 40 days and 40 nights of the election campaign, this piece of political theatre is just the latest wheeze to keep us engaged. My letter box has been rattling with party leaflets for the past fortnight. There are leaders' tours to

come, probing interviews, town hall hustings and a shower of promises and economic statistics. And I wonder what animal will follow the leaders around the campaign trail this yeara chicken, a poodle, a bull, a stag, a wolf, a lamb, a hawk, the elephant in the room ?

As the campaign formally got under way on Monday, the Conservatives asked the voters to stick with their long-term economic plan which had seen growth and employment rising sharply and the government deficit coming down. Labour argued that they too would cut the deficit, but more slowly and more fairly. The Liberal Democrats want something in between. By contrast, the SNP say they want an end to austerity altogether. And although no one wants a coalition after the election, the SNP have been hinting that they might support a Labour government on an issue-by-issue basis. The pollsters reckon this is the closest election in years which will make the constituency counts in early hours of May 8th an exciting moment to be alive.

Not surprisingly, there have been more echoes this week of the independence referendum last September. The prominent businessman Jim McColl has sought to put "full fiscal autonomy" back on the agenda. The unionist parties have raised their hands in horror, saying the Scottish government having full control of all taxes and expenditure would leave a gaping hole of £7.6bn a year in its finances. But the SNP maintain Scotland could grow its way out of deficit if it had all the tax and spending levers at its disposal. And just to prove that devolution is an on-going process, this week the Scottish government began collecting the new housing-buying tax (stamp duty) and the landfill tax. It's the first time new taxes have been levied in Scotland for three hundred years.

Away from politics – or nearly away from politics – we've been told by Police Scotland that they want to end the controversial practice of "consensual stop and search."

Instead they want to move towards a clearer, more legally robust stop-and-search policy. This follows a report from the Chief Inspector of Constabulary who found considerable fault with the way records are kept. And he particularly deplored the "consensual" stopping and searching of children under 12 years of age, a practice which was supposed to have been abandoned last summer but which was still happening in December.

The first of April was the start date for the new system of care for the elderly and chronically ill. The NHS and council social care budgets are being merged to encourage a more "joined-up" approach to patients on the verge of going into, or out of, hospital. The system has been successfully piloted in the Highlands but is now being rolled out across the country. So hopefully there will be no more "bed blocking" and more care for the long-term ill in their own homes.

This week too, it's all change on the rail network. The ScotRail franchise has been taken over by the Dutch state-owned company Abellio. It's promised to introduce 70 new, longer, electric trains on the Edinburgh to Glasgow line and 30 refurbished trains on the lines to the north over the next 10 years. But it's starting this month by issuing its staff (the same staff who worked for the old franchise company, the Aberdeen-based First Group) with smart phones so that they can keep up with changes to the schedules. And we passenger are to get smart cards by the end of the year. All we need now is some smart arrival times, a seat not next to someone on his smart phone and enough smart places to put our bikes.