

Letter from Scotland



A campaign of daffodils

I've spend much of this week wandering lonely as a cloud over the fields and hedgerows of England. On family visits in Norfolk and Hertfordshire I saw ten thousand daffodils, weeping willows just come into leaf and gorse bushes flowering a dazzling yellow. And as we cycled along, there would be the occasional election poster peeking out from newly trimmed gardens to remind us that there was an election on.

When I arrived back in Scotland I found that spring had arrived here too. The daffodils were in full bloom. It was even slightly warm, in the sunshine. But the election posters have not yet flowered and the news is all about that old autumn constitutional chestnut of "full fiscal autonomy".

It seems to have come as a surprise to the press and the unionist parties that the SNP want Scotland to raise all its own taxes and spend all its own money. Of course their MPs would vote for it, if offered the chance. (And so should the Liberal Democrats for that matter, along with new converts to the federal faith like Gordon Brown.)

But Westminster is not going to offer anyone the chance to vote for full fiscal autonomy, at least for the foreseeable future. All parties there, except the SNP, insist the independence referendum last year settled the issue and everyone is getting on with implementing the increased devolution the majority of Scots wanted in the first place.

It's also become clear during the leaders' debates on television that the SNP and the Greens are offering voters a very different vision of the future from the unionist parties...NO to further "austerity" and NO to the renewal of

Trident nuclear weapons. Both are probably minority views but they are held by a sufficient number of committed voters to make the election too close to call. At least though, the campaign is coming down to substantive issues and is not just a series of small one-upmanship bids on health spending or childcare and dubious claims about the economy.

Happily, some people in Scotland are thinking slightly longer-term. Researchers at Edinburgh University have been studying the Great Extinction, some 250 million years ago. They've discovered that a series of volcanic eruptions caused so much carbon dioxide to enter the atmosphere that two-thirds of land animals died out and 90 per cent of marine life perished in the acidic seas. It's only slightly reassuring that even if we continue to burn all the known oil reserves in the world it would not produce as much carbon dioxide as the ancient volcanoes but it is a warning that CO2 is bad for our health.

Having completed my own cycle journeys this Easter, I take my helmet off to Scots adventurer Mark Beaumont who is setting off on a 10,000km cycle ride through Africa. His aim is to cycle from Cairo to Cape Town in less than 50 days. This is a man who has already cycled round the world and from the north to the south of the Americas, so for him this latest ride must seem like a Saturday afternoon jaunt.

Another handsome Scot with a Saturday afternoon engagement is Andy Murray. He gets married tomorrow in his home town of Dunblane to the lady who has cheered him through many a triumph and disaster Kim Sears. The town has apparently gone delirious with pubs and high street shops all selling Andy/Kim themed products and the golden post-box in honour of Andy's Olympic medal has been given a new lick of paint. And so the town with pleasure fills and dances with the daffodils.

