

Letter from Scotland



A new Lady flies in

Scotland is in mourning for a fine Lady who has gone missing, presumed dead. The faithful female osprey, named Lady, has failed return to the Scottish Wildlife Trust's reserve at Loch of Lowes in Perthshire for the first time in 24 years. She is thought to have had an accident or simply been too old to complete the 4,000 mile journey back from her winter feeding grounds in West Africa. Up till now the Lady has not been for turning. She has lived three time longer than the average osprey, successfully reared 50 chicks and earned millions of pounds for the Scottish tourist industry.

But already a smart new female, named Lassie, has taken her place. She arrived on 31st March and quickly moved in with Laddie who has been Lady's partner for the past few years. This week, they produced their first egg and staff at the reserve are hoping a new dynasty of Lowes ospreys has been established. How quickly we accept regime change and forget the past.

I wonder if we will be able to accept the result of the general election on May 7th with quite such equanimity...if indeed there is to be regime change. This week the parties have been setting out their stall of promises like street traders on market day. They've been calling out their bargains and perfecting their patter. The manifestos have been published and subjected to a fairly heavy pounded by the think tanks and the pundits.

Everyone, of course, is promising to reduce the government deficit (now running at around 5 per cent of GDP) and start repaying the national debt. They just differ over the timescale. The Conservatives want to balance the books by

2018, Labour by 2020, the Lib Dems somewhere in between and the anti-austerity parties like the SNP, the Greens and the Socialists say it will take a little longer. Each party insists its promises have been fully costed but again it depends on the assumptions made.

Which leaves us with the “gut” issues of independence, immigration, nuclear weapons, personalities and, above all, trust. The last of the UK leaders’ television debates took place on Thursday, without David Cameron and Nick Clegg who very sportingly wanted to give the opposition parties a chance to air their views. Once again Nicola Sturgeon shone brightly, challenging Ed Miliband over austerity, Trident, and a deal with the SNP to keep the Tories out of power. The press pundits judged, though, that Mr Miliband came out of it pretty well.

Meanwhile, out in the real world, unemployment has been rising again. In Scotland the rate is back up to 6 per cent, compared to 5.6 per cent for the UK as a whole. Although the overall number of people in work is up, so too is the number of people seeking work, particularly young people. Youth unemployment is still scandalously high at 17 per cent. It’s true that growth has returned to the economy (2.8 per cent) and inflation is at zero but real earnings have only just recovered after 6 years of decline and a fifth of all jobs are only part-time.

Of course, part-time work suits some people, like doctors, who are on annual salaries of between £60,000 and £80,000 a year. According to the BMA this week, another 14 per cent of GPs are thinking of going part-time, 32 per cent are thinking of retiring early. They put this down to the pressures of the job – too little time for each patient and too much bureaucracy. The answer to the “crisis”, according to the BMA, is to increase the share of the health budget going to general practice so that more GPs can be employed. But that, of course, implies cuts elsewhere.

The whole county was shocked this week by the murder of “a lovely and popular” young woman in Glasgow. Karen Buckley was a 24 year-old nurse from Ireland who was enrolled on an occupational therapy course at Glasgow Caledonian University. She’d been on a night out with friends in a Glasgow club. Her body was found on a farm not far from the city.

Mercifully, such killings are becoming rarer. Last year, 61 people were murdered in Scotland, the lowest figure for 40 years. But Scotland still has the seventh highest murder rate in Europe, way above the rate in England and Wales. Most Scottish murders are the result of pub brawls, drink-fuelled domestic disputes or knife carrying gang fights. Three quarters of victims are men. And last year, every single murder was solved by the police. A 21 year-old man has already appeared in court on Friday charged with Karen’s murder.

I was shocked too to learn this week that the Clydesdale Bank had been fined £20m for trying to cover up its mistakes over the selling of payment protection insurance. It’s not the first bank to misbehave of course, but I expected better from a fine Scottish institution, founded in 1838 as a charity bank by a Glasgow councillor James Lumsden. Its own distinctive bank notes sport Robert Burns on the £10 note and Robert the Bruce on the £20 note, an assurance of good Scots values.

Last month the bank showed a brave willingness to turn over a new leaf by pioneered the plastic note, a £5 note celebrating the 125th anniversary of the Forth Rail Bridge. But now the shame-faced current owners, the National Bank of Australia, are planning to sell the Clydesdale at a knock down price of £2 billion. I think the city of Glasgow should buy it and restore the bank’s reputation.