

Letter from Scotland



Voters enjoy a sunny day on the Meadows and a break from the election

We have had two slight distractions from the election campaign this week. One was the good weather which, for a brief moment, gave us a glimpse of summer and persuaded the blossom to come out on the cherry trees and barbecues to appear on Edinburgh's dreamy Meadows. The other was the "hand-ball affair."

It wasn't quite Diego Maradona's "Hand of God" but it has been, to put it mildly, the talking point of the week. It concerns a football match in which Celtic lost 3-2 to plucky Caledonian Thistle in the Scottish Cup semi-finals last weekend. Celtic were one goal up and were about to score a second when the hand, or rather the arm, of the Caley defender Josh Meekings happened to interrupt the ball on its way to the net. Apparently the referee didn't see the incident and none of the other match officials drew attention to it, so no penalty was awarded.

The luck of the game you might say. But most unsportingly, Celtic players, and even the manager, complained about the refereeing afterwards. The official compliance officer (a new panjandrum to me) reported the matter to the Football Association and recommended that Meekings be disciplined. The three wise men on the adjudication panel acted as their name suggests and threw out the complaint. So Meekings, and his now famous hand or arm, will be on the pitch again on 30 May for the cup final when Caledonian Thistle will take on another giant-killer, Falkirk.

Just how can the General Election keep up with that excitement? Well, with less than two weeks to go, there is everything

to play for. The opinion polls are showing Labour and the Conservatives neck and neck in England and the SNP away ahead in Scotland.

Indeed the SNP are playing more and more of a central role in this election. David Cameron says he's "frightened" by the prospect of a "coalition of chaos" between Labour and the SNP. Sir John Major, the former Tory prime minister, declared it would be "a recipe for mayhem."

Nicola Sturgeon said such talk was all silly scaremongering and then proceeded to make the Tories even more frightened by saying SNP MPs at Westminster would be voting on issues such as health spending in England, because it had consequences for the block grant given to Scotland. The Tories struck back by saying they would introduce a new system at Westminster which ensured there would be "English votes for English laws." Gordon Brown then accused the Conservatives of stoking up English nationalism for their own purposes.



Ms Sturgeon tried to take the sting out of such unseemly England v Scotland antagonism when she used the SNP manifesto launch to reassure voters in England that the party would use its influence at Westminster "responsibly and constructively" to improve the government of the whole of the UK. The event was held at the spectacular International Climbing Centre in a former stone quarry at Ratho on the outskirts of Edinburgh. It made for a colourful rally, demonstrating the SNP's considerable support. As a result, it was top spot on the UK television news that night.



The other parties have also been launching their Scottish manifestos this week and their leaders have been touring high streets, factories, children's playgroups, farmer's fields and

iconic sites to give us attractive backgrounds for their various announcements, or re-announcements.

And while all this was going on, the Scottish Parliament has been plodding away on the humdrum business of governing Scotland. MSPs approved the general principles of a bill to licence air guns. They also watched the justice secretary Michael Matheson kick his predecessor's controversial plans to scrap the corroboration rule in Scots Law into the long grass. It was all too complicated, especially at a time when no one wants to upset the voters.

But let's not steer away from all controversial issues. Should the Loch Ness Monster replace the Unicorn as our national symbol? A Highland tour company has come up with the idea of ditching the 12th century mythical beast on many a Scottish flag, with a 20th century mythical beast. Or maybe Nessie won't be so mythical in the 21st century. This week Google launched its Nessie-watch web-cam which allows us all to scour Loch Ness day and night, 24/7, which will surely prove the monster's existence once and for all.