

Letter from Scotland



The old station at
Ballater, now sadly gone.

I am in mourning for a lovely old building on Royal Deeside which has gone up in smoke. No, not Balmoral Castle but the old railway station in Ballater where Queen Victoria used to catch the train. It was one of the staging posts of my youth...heading for the hills on the bike or on Strachan's buses or in vans with the scout troop or on family outings in the Ford Cortina. And now it lies in ruins, its white clapboard walls and red-trimmed guttering all gone.

It closed as a station in the 1966, exactly one hundred years after it opened. But it had a second life as a museum and restaurant. Unfortunately, all the firefighters have been able to save is a replica of the carriage in which Queen Victoria herself travelled in the heyday of the Royal Highlands. Those days have gone and so has that reminder of my own early life.

Blinking, I wake up now to a totally different world. Prince Charles' private letters are made public for all to see. A Conservative cabinet only has half its members educated in private schools and ministers are calling themselves "blue collar workers". There appears to be no Liberal Party, no Labour Party, and the SNP are in total control in Scotland.

Nicola Sturgeon, Queen of Scots, has been laying down her demands to David Cameron and his new government at Westminster.....give Scotland more powers or there'll be a second referendum on independence. The new Scottish Secretary, the lone Tory MP in Scotland David Mundell, has promised no more than the already-agreed Smith Commission powers but he has hinted that further powers may be devolved to Scotland at a later stage.

In the Scottish Parliament there have been warnings that the Smith powers do not go far enough. And there's also been some trembling over what else is to come north on the chilly winds from Westminster...more Barnett budget cuts, more welfare cuts, more crackdowns on the unions. Meanwhile, at the other end of the Royal Mile, the Church of Scotland's General Assembly will have its say this week on the state of the nation. I wonder what advice it will have for the very different governments in London and Edinburgh.

On employment, for instance. We learnt on Wednesday that the number of people seeking work in Scotland has risen sharply, by 19,000, in the first quarter of the year. It's now 6 per cent, in contrast to a fall in the UK as a whole to 5.5 per cent. Or the health service, where waiting time targets are still being missed. Or education, where only one in three pupils in deprived areas passes a Higher exam.

The saddest news of the week was the death of 11 year old Keir Millar from Lockerbie. Even at his tender age he was a world champion stock-car racer. He died from his injuries after an accident at the races at Lochgelly in Fife at the weekend.

Young Keir came from a family of stock-car racers, his father and brother are both well-known figures in the sport. Further races at Lochgelly have been cancelled and an investigation is under way into how the accident happened.

Students at Edinburgh University have been protesting at a decision by the university court not to withdraw its investments in fossil fuel companies. The pressure group, People and Planet, have been campaigning to persuade Edinburgh to follow the lead given by Glasgow University last year when it became the first university in Europe to sell its fossil fuel shares. Edinburgh has invested around £9m of its £300m portfolio in oil and gas companies but the university says it does not invest in the most polluting industries, coal and tar sand, and its research is always directed at how to reduce carbon emissions and tackle climate change.

It's an age-old debate over whether you try to achieve change from inside an institution or country or whether it's better to stay outside and protest. In my student days it was about apartheid in South Africa, then it was oranges from Israel, now it's climate change or human rights in China and the Middle East.

The weather has been pretty cold here for the past few weeks but finally the skiing season is over. Scotland's five ski resorts say they've had a fantastic season, like last year, with more snow and better snow than in the Alps. They've been counting up the "skier days", 230,634 of them, which contributed £23m to the economy.

But even the powers that be at Edinburgh University are not arguing that a good fall of snow on the Scottish mountains is evidence that climate change has gone into reverse. The snowfall is but a windfall.