

Letter from Scotland



Falkirk's wheel of fortune

It's more important than the economy or politics or even life and death. We're talking about football, Scotland's other religion. This weekend sees the end-of-season Cup Final and how refreshing it is to have two small teams facing each other on the hallowed turf at Hampden Park. Falkirk Football Club, one of the oldest clubs in the world, founded in 1876, will play Inverness Caledonian Thistle, one of the youngest, formed in 1994. Both have battled through to the final against the likes of Celtic, Rangers, Aberdeen, Hearts, Hibs, the two Dundee teams, the commercialised big boys of Scottish football.

I suppose the favourite must be Inverness Caledonian Thistle, since they play in the premier division. Falkirk are in the lower championship division and we have to go back to 1957 to find them winning the Scottish Cup – though they came close in 2009 when they lost out to Rangers in the final.

A look down the playing squad of each team reveals a lot about where Scottish football – indeed football in general – has gone wrong, in my humble non-expert opinion! Of the 24 players in the Caley Thistle squad, only seven are Scottish, the rest come from England, Ireland, Estonia and Canada. By contrast, in the championship side, Falkirk, 16 out of the squad of 21 players are Scottish.

My point being this : that our senior teams have relied too much on buying in players from abroad, at great expense, and this has led to the financial ruin of many clubs – most spectacularly Rangers – and to a loss of home-grown talent.

Football has become all about winning rather than playing. If I was in charge, I would make it a rule that a club can

only field players who were born or brought up in their local area, just as national sides can only field native players.

You can perhaps tell I don't really mind who wins the cup this weekend, so long as we have a good game, plenty of goals, no questioning of the refereeing, and a local lad is voted man-of-the-match.

This weekend too we will learn if Rangers can return to premier division football after their three years in purgatory for their financial sins. They play Motherwell, a well-behaved stalwart of the game since 1886, who find themselves this season at the bottom of the premier division and forced into this play-off with Rangers. It will be a weekend of triumph and disaster and let's hope, like Rudyard Kipling, we can treat those two imposters just the same.

Apart from football, there's not much else happening. Oh, I suppose I should mention politics ! David Cameron has been outlining his legislative programme in the Queen's Speech and causing some fiery reactions in Scotland. The SNP- with their 56 white-rose-wearing MPs at Westminster – want a "national" lock on his plan to hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union. They insist there should be a majority in each of the four nations of the United Kingdom before Britain can leave the EU. Not surprisingly, the SNP are also unhappy at the limited powers being offered to Scotland in the further-devolution bill.

The Scottish Labour Party leadership election has entered its own fiery phase. One of the contenders, Ken Mackintosh, has alleged that his supporters have been "bullied, intimidated and pressurised" by the party hierarchy to withdraw their backing in order to allow the front-runner Kezia Dugdale to be crowned without a divisive contest.

And meanwhile one of the other small parties in Scotland, the Liberal Democrats, have run into a little local difficulty. Their MP in Orkney and Shetland is left clinging to the rocks

after a silly mistake he made during the election campaign.

Alistair Carmichael, then Secretary of State for Scotland, allowed an internal memo to be leaked to the press alleging that Nicola Sturgeon secretly wanted David Cameron to win the election. The memo turned out to be incorrect and Carmichael compounded the error by claiming to the press that he knew nothing about the leak. The astonishing fact is that the party has come out in his defence, saying we should forgive and forget.

There was yet another example this week of politicians being out of touch with public opinion. By 82 votes to 36, MSPs in the Scottish Parliament rejected the Assisted Suicide Bill being proposed by the Green MSP Patrick Harvie. An opinion poll earlier this month by ORB found that 73 per cent of people supported the bill and other surveys across Britain have found similar support for “assisted dying”, the rather more euphemistic name given to the bill in England. I suppose MPS felt the pressure of official religious opinion, which is against the bill, and – to be fair – they faced the difficulty of actually drafting the law to achieve the desired end.

Finally, I was surprised to read in the newspapers that Glasgow University is sending in a team of classics scholars to teach Latin to primary school pupils in some of the most deprived parts of the city. The university says it will improve the children’s literacy skills. And “The Scotsman” helpfully provided them with a Glasgow-Latin phrasebook which begins thus:

Patter – Crepito

Ya beauty- Ya pulchritudinem

Away ye go- Scitis ire

Ah havnae a scooby- Ergo daemonium non scooby

Steamin' – Fumantia soluere

Aye right- Lus zelatorem

(Amo, Amas, Amat..... Ed.)