

Letter from Scotland



An unsettling end to the
exam season

Oh happy day ! For 132,000 young Scots, the exam season is over. It all began with drama and economics on 28th April and it has ended with philosophy and child care. The English Higher was on 15th May and the Maths Higher on the 20th, and thereby hangs a tale. Because, immediately after the maths exam, pupils complained that it was too difficult, or at least that it included questions which were not in the syllabus.

This, of course, is the first year of the new-style Highers and it appears that some pupils were taught under the old syllabus but were presented for the new Highers. Around half of all schools were so baffled by the new Curriculum for Excellence that they opted to stick with the old exams for another year and this may have led to some confusion. The Scottish Qualifications Authority has sought to reassure us all that no pupil will be disadvantaged if the maths exam turns out to be more difficult than in previous years. The marking system will be adjusted and all will be well on results day, 4th August.

The new Curriculum for Excellence was introduced in 2010 when the shocking news broke that Scotland – and the UK as a whole – had dropped out of the OECD's top 20 education systems in the world. It seeks to make schooling more relevant to everyday life and to cater for all abilities. Its mantra reads like a party manifesto: "to create successful learners, confident individuals, responsible citizens and effective contributors." Teachers point out that it's what they have been doing all along, except the new system has brought with it a pile of extra bureaucracy.

The largest teachers union, the EIS, is debating this extra workload this very weekend at its 169th annual conference in Perth. There's word of a boycott of SQA assessments and there are complaints too about teacher numbers, now at their lowest for ten years, despite a rising school-age population. At first minister's question time Nicola Sturgeon told MSPs that the government has set up a working party to cut bureaucracy and it has allocated an extra £51m to "maintain" teacher numbers. How this will be found, with the new round of austerity cuts (£180m for Scotland this year) announced by the Chancellor on Thursday remains to be seen. It all amounts to a testing time for the hallowed Scottish education system and the summer holidays cannot come too soon.

This week the nation is in mourning for one of our finest politicians. [Charles Kennedy](#) was found dead at his home near Fort William on Monday evening. He was only 55. Tributes have flooded in from all parts of the political world, and beyond, for a talented man who served for 32 years as the MP for his homeland of Ross, Skye and Lochaber and led the Liberal Democrats to their greatest victory (62 seats) in 2005. But he had two personal flaws. One was that he never climbed Ben Nevis despite living at the foot of it for most of his life. And he was a victim of the demon drink. Why is it that so many talented people are taken from us in this way ?

From a fine man, to a rogue. Andy Coulson, former editor of the Sun newspaper, was cleared of perjury after a two week trial at the High Court in Edinburgh. But it was a curious case because the jury never got to decide whether he'd been lying or not during the earlier trial of the Socialist politician Tommy Sheridan. Instead the case was dismissed by the judge Lord Burns because whether Coulson had lied or not was not relevant to the case against Tommy Sheridan. You would have thought the prosecution would have seen this before embarking on a million pound trial and questions are now being asked of the Crown Prosecution Service. So Andy walks away

Scot free, though of course he has served a jail term in England for conspiracy to hack into private phone conversations.

Is the fashion for “targets” finally on the wane ? Doctors and nurses certainly hope so. For the first time, the Royal Colleges have teamed up to call for an end to the “unsustainable culture” of ever-rising targets for numbers of patients treated within a certain time. They say the measures – now printed out weekly – are too crude and too distracting. Instead there needs to be a more integrated approach to the huge problems facing the NHS – an aging population, widening health inequalities and patients’ unrealistic expectations.

Indeed, in this digital age, there is a wider issue here. We have become obsessed by numbers...GDP, growth rates, points or scores in sport, temperatures, pollen counts, populations, foot-fall...and computers have aided and abetted this obsession. But I think there was value in the analogue age when other factors were taken into accountquality, circumstances, long-term viabilityand numbers were only taken as a guide and not an end in themselves.

The animal world manages very well without numbers. This week the animals had a couple of lessons for us. A pod of over twenty pilot whales illustrated the virtues of solidarity when they beached themselves on Staffin Island off the Isle of Skye. They were, it’s thought, trying to accompany one of their number who was ill or in some sort of distress. Unfortunately nine of the whales died in this neighbourly gesture, including a mother who’d just given birth to her calf and who was perhaps the cause of the stranding. And in Shetland, we had a lesson in motherly discipline when a cow had to be brought in to calm a young bullock who ran amok in Lerwick on Tuesday night and injured two people.

Finally, I should up-date regular readers on football. No, there hasn’t been a corruption scandal, nor has the Football

Association chairman resigned or been re-elected. But there the international comparison ends. Inverness Caledonian Thistle have won the Scottish Cup and Rangers have failed to re-gain admission to the premier league.

As I said, the holidays cannot come too soon.