

Letter from Scotland



Summertime and the living
is easy

Summer has finally arrived. For three consecutive days we have been walking around in t-shirts under blue skies and blazing suns. Temperatures hovered around 22 degrees Celsius in Central Scotland on Thursday and a scorching 24 in Aboyne. Even the flowers have been surprised and have wilted in the midday heat. At the Botanic Gardens in Edinburgh twitching botanists are waiting to see if the *amorphophallus titanium* will flower – it does so once in every seven years and then only for 48 hours. The male of the species is always so romantic !

So the heatwave which was supposed to start in April, may well have begun at last....though, this is Scotland, so things may change again. We have been doing our best not to change the climate like this. But for the fourth year running we have failed to meet our target for cutting carbon emissions to 47.9m tonnes. We came close however. Figures out this week show we pumped 49.7m tonnes of carbon into the atmosphere in 2012/13. And the government maintains we are still going to meet our globally ambitious target of cutting emissions by 42 per cent by 2020.

We've already achieved a 38 per cent reduction since the base year in 1990. But that's been fairly easy, with the move away from coal and heavy industry. The furnaces at Longannet will be closing down next year and that will help too. So will the electrification of the railways and the home insulation programme. But environmentalists say the Scottish government needs to stop building new roads and stop talking about cuts to air passenger duty.

When we haven't been worrying about climate change, we've been listening to our politicians banging on about "full fiscal autonomy". We've heard more about the £7.6 billion black hole in the Scottish budget if the government here were to be in charge of all its revenue and expenditure. The SNP say the black hole would soon be filled by economic growth and this week they tabled an amendment to the latest devolution bill at Westminster to move towards full fiscal responsibility as soon as possible.

The Labour Party has worked out that the price of North Sea oil would need to rise to \$200 a barrel (from its current \$60) to close the fiscal gap. And the Orwellian Office of Budget Responsibility has worked out that, actually, North Sea revenues are set to fall from £34bn a year to just £2bn because of the industry's "mid-life crisis", the term used this week by Aberdeen Chamber of Commerce.

The deputy first minister John Swinney though was having none of this. At question time at Holyrood he accused Labour of peddling "the politics of fear". He was standing in for Scotland's new international celebrity Nicola Sturgeon. She was over in America touring the White House, the World Bank, the IMF, the think tanks and television studios. She even took tea at the exclusive Lowell Hotel in New York, and not just any tea, but tea grown in the foothills of the Himalayas of Perthshire.

Meanwhile, the Chancellor George Osborne was selling off the nation's stake in the Royal Bank of Scotland, or at least hoping to off-load some of the £45bn of shares we bought to bail the bank out in 2008. The sale will begin in the autumn and if it goes well over the next few years, it will bring in £32bn to the Treasury. The union Unite has condemned it as an early sale at a "knock-down price" but the Chancellor says it's the best deal the taxpayer can get.

And now the strange case of Sheku Bayoh. He was a young man

from Sierra Leone who'd lived in Fife for ten years and had a young family. For reasons we don't know he was arrested by the police on 3rd May in Kirkcaldy and died in their custody. The cause of death has not yet been established but is believed to be asphyxiation. The internal police investigation took over a month to take statements from the police officers involved – one of whom was injured in the incident – and no report has yet been published. Last weekend, hundreds of local people attended Sheku's funeral and paused outside Kirkcaldy police station calling for an explanation. I think we are owed one.

Finally, we learned this week that the Isle of Skye has become a palaeontologist's paradise. Apparently, dinosaur hunters are flocking to the island following the discovery of several exciting fossils by experts from Edinburgh University. The fossils are from the mid-Jurassic period, about 170 million years ago, and include parts from long-necked dinosaurs, heavy weight armour plated dinosaurs and early examples of tyrannosaurus rex. At the time, Skye was part of a swampy, hot steamy jungle until climate change took a hand.

With the scorching week we've had, it looks like we're heading that way again, though I gather there may be one or two chilly weekends before Scotland becomes a Mediterranean country.