

Letter from Scotland



You could almost touch the
puffins on the Isle of May

I didn't count them myself but I was told there were 46,000 pairs of puffins on the Isle of May last weekend. I got within three or four metres of these superbly colourful birds, almost clown-like. Several held a slithering supply of sand eels in their beaks, waiting for a safe moment to dart into their burrows and feed their young.

And these were not the only inhabitants of this dramatic island at the mouth of the Firth of Forth. There were guillemots and razorbills, sparkling white kittiwakes and neatly dressed arctic terns – 250,000 birds in all. The terns attacked us as we left the ferry-boat, screaming and hovering over our heads and occasionally striking us with their claws or beaks. Their little fury chicks were nestling in the grass nearby. I saw one parent pop an eel into a chick's throat, just in front of me, less than a metre from the path.

As a mere human, I was amazed and humbled when I was told these terns would fly to the Antarctic for a second feeding season, a round trip of over 50,000 miles. They spend most of their lives in the air, lives that last 20 or 30 years. They look so frail and have such tiny brains, yet they can do more in a lifetime than I ever could.

Back on the mainland, we are struggling with our trivial human issues. As I write, the Chancellor is about to announce his latest austerity budget – big cuts to welfare are on the agenda. There are on-going pay disputes on the trains and the ferries. Last Sunday, train services were badly hit by drivers refusing to work over-time. And this coming Friday, there is the prospect of another strike on the west coast ferries.

Down at Westminster, MPs have been haggling over the Scotland Bill, the latest round of devolution to the Scottish Parliament. This is supposed to fulfil the so-called "vow" made by the unionist parties in the days running up to the independence referendum. There will be powers to set the rate and bands on income tax and powers to spend half of the VAT raised in Scotland and responsibility for some welfare payments. A last minute attempt to have the rules over abortion devolved was defeated. Pro-life campaigners were under the rather strange impression that if the Scottish Parliament were to write the laws on abortion, they would be somehow stricter than Westminster's.

On Tuesday, the opposition parties staged a debate over the ominously named "EVEL" proposals – English votes for English laws. They got the chance to let off steam about the government's plan to give English MPs a veto over matters that are deemed to affect England only. But for all the SNP and Labour anger, the debate will have no effect and the Conservatives will, no doubt, use their majority to push the new arrangements through by the end of term.

Out on the sports field, Andy Murray is leading the way for Scotland at Wimbledon. So far so good. I loved the way he lobbed a cheeky shot over the head of the Croatian giant Ivo Karlovic (2.08m or 6'11") to win a place in the last eight.

We are also entering the golf season, with the Scottish Open beginning on Thursday at Gullane and the British Open at St Andrew's next week. The big news is that the world's number one golfer, Irishman Rory McIlroy, has pulled out of Gullane because of an ankle injury sustained while playing football. He may also have to miss the Open at St Andrews. His place may be taken by Russell Knox (no relation unfortunately) one of the handful of Scots who have made it into the final list of players at St Andrew's.

Forth Rail Bridge, now one
of the thousand wonders of
the world

But I want to end back in the Firth of Forth. On Sunday, UNESCO declared the Forth Rail Bridge a World Heritage site. It joins 1031 such sites in the world, five of them in Scotland – St Kilda, the Antonine Wall, Edinburgh Old and New Towns, New Lanark and Skara Brae. The ingenious invention of the cantilever bridge by the Victorians in 1882 is still a thing of beauty. The 20th century Forth Road Bridge has a certain grace. But I'm wondering if the 21st century bridge now taking shape can follow in this world heritage tradition. Somehow I doubt it. I think we might come to call it the Austerity Bridge.