

Letter from Scotland



Reclaiming the wilderness –
Glen Shiel

If there is any “re-wilding” to be done, then Scotland is the place to do it. A new campaign was launched by conservationists this week to make the case for “Rewilding Britain”, leaving two or three vast areas of the landscape to go back to nature and re-introducing lost species such as the beaver, the lynx, the wild boar and the wolf.

The Highlands are often said to be the last wilderness left in western Europe. I guess that’s why so many tourists come to see it and breathe in its open spaces. I was hill-walking myself last week in Glen Shiel and when the mist suddenly cleared on the top of The Saddle a magnificent panorama opened up beneath me...corries, ridges, lochs and glens, distant mountain ranges, islands out at sea. The only man-made objects in sight were a crumbling stone wall and the road weaving its way through the glen below. There’s something spiritually humbling about such moments and that’s why “the wilderness” is so good for us.

The re-wilding campaigners say we should withdraw man’s influence from areas of wilderness like the western Highlands, stop subsidising sheep and agriculture and forestry, introduce wolves to cull the deer, stop building roads and pylons and wind turbines and cater for tourists only on the fringes of the protected areas. The campaign is backed by a diverse range of conservation bodies, from the John Muir Trust and Friends of the Earth to the Cairngorm National park and the Forestry Commission. And, of course, it faces opposition, or at least scepticism, from the farming industry, the sporting estates and local authorities. But at least the debate has begun.

There's been a countryside theme to the politics of the week too. Foxhunting has been at the centre of things and, as it always does, it drags in a whole pack of other toxic issues....class warfare, England versus Scotland, rights versus freedoms, tradition versus modernity. It began with the Westminster government wanting to ease the ban on hunting in England (introduced by Labour) by permitting a whole pack of hounds to flush out foxes to waiting guns, rather than just the two dogs laid down in the current law. This would bring it into line with the law in Scotland.

But, curiously, the SNP scuppered the plan by announcing they would join with Labour and vote against the change – thus breaking their self-denying ordinance of not voting on purely English matters. They explained this by saying that David Cameron had to be reminded how narrow his majority was in the House of Commons. And furthermore, they were angry that no amendments had been allowed to the Scotland Bill on further devolution of powers to the Scottish Parliament. And another thing, they were pretty cheesed off at the Tory plan to restrict the rights of Scottish MPs to vote on English matters. In the end, the government promised to think again about all these troublesome issues and return to the fray after the summer holidays.

Meanwhile, things are threatening to fall apart for one of the SNP government's flagship reforms, the merging of eight local police forces into one "Police Scotland." It arises from the tragic case of a young couple killed when their car spun off the M9 motorway near Stirling. The car ended up in a ditch and a passing motorist reported it to the police. However, nothing was done for three days. Eventually, when the accident was reported for a second time, the police found that John Yuill had died at the wheel and his partner Lamara Bell had been trapped in the vehicle for so long that she too died later in hospital.

An investigation is now under way to find out why the first

call had not been acted upon and if short-staffing at the local control room had been to blame. The case comes on top of questions over Police Scotland's centralising culture, its frequent use of "stop-and-search" powers and its use of armed police officers for routine duties. The Chief Constable Sir Stephen House has so far refused to bow to opposition parties' demands that he resign.

I was surprised to learn this week that some 250 Scottish soldiers are being sent to Afghanistan. I thought all British troops had been withdrawn last October and our 13-year long military mission there was over. But apparently this is not a combat mission. The soldiers from the Royal Regiment of Scotland will be based in a college near Kabul training recruits for the Afghan army. They will be there for seven months. Let's hope they all survive another demanding posting in what is still a dangerous country.

Finally, we are about to suffer another bout of golfing fever. This only affects men, by the way. (OH Mr Knox how can you say that! Ed.) Not content with the Scottish Open at Gullane last week (won by American Rickie Fowler), we now move on to the British Open at St Andrews.

The last time I heard from St Andrews, the Royal and Ancient Golf Club was ending its 260 year old tradition of banning women from membership. I see this week that the Braemar Royal Highland Society, which runs the famous Braemar Games, has followed suit by allowing women to become members for the first time in its 200 year old history. The next bastion to fall may well be the Royal Troon Golf Club which is due to host the Open next year. It's currently holding a review of its men-only policy. As for the ladies, they are due to hold their British Open later this month at Turnberry, owned by Donald Trump who this week every nearly fell out with the ladies over the surprising issue of Mexician immigrants.

Things are pretty wild even in the gentle world of golf.