

Letter from Scotland



Every night I hear the curfew – after which all good Edinburgh citizens should be in bed. But the fireworks at the end of each Tattoo on the castle esplanade are the signal for foreign festival-goers to rush to their final show of the night or to parade down the Royal Mile, or through the Grassmarket, looking for somewhere to eat or drink.

We are having a really good festival season this year. Ticket sales are up – by a third, according to some venues in the Fringe. The crowds in the streets seem more swarm-like than ever. And the weather has been mild and fairly dry. Six out of the seven shows I have been to have been packed out. The seventh was Stravinsky, which might explain why the Usher Hall was only half full.

But while the crowds in central Edinburgh were enjoying themselves, the rest of Scotland was returning to normal after the summer holidays. The schools reopened, the Labour Party continued the almost annual process of electing a new leader and the inquiries and court hearings resumed.

The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon spent her first day back at school announcing an ambitious target – to close the attainment gap between good schools and poor schools. Wisely, she did not put a time scale on it, because this seems to me to be a huge task. But the Scottish Government is going to introduce a common nation-wide test to measure standards in all primary schools. “I want to be judged on this,” Ms Sturgeon told pupils and parents at the Wester Hailes Education Centre. “I want to close the attainment gap completely.” A fund of £100m is being targeted on the poorest performing schools.

Funnily enough, the new-elected leader of the Labour Party in

Scotland, Kezia Dugdale, also wants to make education a top priority. In her first major speech as leader, she spoke of her own school experience. In Elgin she was an average pupil in a good rural school but when her family moved to Dundee she found herself top of the class in a poor-performing school. And when she went to Aberdeen University to study law she was surrounded by “by privately educated students whose backgrounds I couldn’t relate to and whose achievements I couldn’t compete with.”

Another comprehensive school pupil was strutting his stuff this week, none other than the mighty man from Fife, Gordon Brown. No, he wasn’t performing at the Edinburgh Festival, he was at the Southbank in London lecturing Labour Party members on how they should vote in the UK leadership election. “Don’t vote for Corbyn” was his message but, speaking in Delphic tones as befits a former leader, he did not mention Jeremy by name. Instead he warned against Labour being a “permanent party of protest.” My own reaction was – what’s wrong with protest, after five years of “austerity” and another five to come? The amusing thing is that the more the grandees of the Labour Party warn against a Corbyn victory, the more the members want to vote for him. It shows just how out of touch the old leaders have become.

Another weakened institution, the Catholic Church, found itself in more trouble this week. Archbishop Philip Tartaglia was forced to apologise for decades of abuse by a number of priests, nuns and teachers at a string of church institutions supposed to be caring for young people. It followed the publication of the McLellan Report, an independent investigation into allegations of child abuse, commissioned by the Catholic Church and headed by Rev Dr Andrew McLellan, a former moderator of the Church of Scotland. He recommended more support for survivors, a re-writing of the church’s child protection policy and training for all staff in recognising and preventing abuse. The victims themselves said neither the

report nor the apology were enough.

The fatal accident inquiry into the bin lorry crash in Glasgow before Christmas which killed six pedestrians is now nearing completion. This week it heard from the lorry driver Harry Clarke. But he was not able to throw much light on the incident since he had fallen unconscious at the wheel. His lawyers also advised him not to say too much, since he is facing a private prosecution by some of the families involved. It has emerged during evidence at the inquiry that Mr Clarke had suffered blackouts before and it's alleged he failed to disclose them when he took up the job of a lorry driver with Glasgow Council.

We have finally got a date for the closure of the Longannet coal-fired power station in Fife. It will close at the end of March next year with the loss of 236 jobs. The owners, Scottish Power, and the Scottish government, blame the early closure on the £40m bill the power station faces each year to connect to the national grid. But the station would have to close anyway in four years' time because of its age (nearly 50 years old) and ever increasing carbon taxes.

The closure will of course put us back on track to reducing Scotland's carbon emissions. And the government has been underlining its "green" credentials this week by keeping the ban on GM crops and closing the Marine Protected Area off the Summer Isles to scallop dredging. The scientists and fishermen are furious. But aren't they always?

Finally, what are the scientists and the fishermen going to do about the jellyfish invasion around our coasts? Apparently, their numbers have been growing for the third year in a row. The most common are large "barrel" jellyfish, but there have also been increases in the numbers of mauve stingers, moon jellyfish and Portuguese Men O' War. No one knows the reason why, though I bet it's climate change and they will all go away again when Longannet closes!