

Letter from Scotland



Lanark no more

As the Edinburgh Festival comes to an end, I find myself reflecting on the image it has left on modern Scotland. It's been a popular festival. Ticket sales have been at record levels, the crowds in the streets and at pavement cafes patrons have been enjoying unusually warm, sunny weather. The concerts and shows I've been to have been pretty good...with one exception, the Citizens Theatre production of "Lanark."

This dark story of an artist growing up in post-war Glasgow is just what Scotland doesn't need. It's depressing and pointless. I hesitate to disagree with Joyce McMillan, one of Scotland's leading theatre critics, but I would give this production only one star, not her five. I found it pretentious, self-absorbed, gratuitously shocking, too long and too clever by half, much like the huge book by Alasdair Gray on which it is based. You would think the Edinburgh International Festival and the Citizens Theatre could find a subject more exciting and relevant in modern Scotland than this James Joyce look-alike of jumbled up thoughts and mad references. At one point, the heroine appears as a crocodile imprisoned in a 1984-style "institute."

Scotland is better than this. To hark back to the bad old days in Glasgow does us all a disservice, particularly when there is no suggested way out. It's putting our self-doubt, our persecution complex and the chip on our shoulder on the stage for all the world to see.

The reality is different. This week we got the results of the annual Scottish Household Survey of over 5,700 Scots. It found that 90 per cent of us are happy with the neighbourhood in which we live. 85 per cent of us feel safe walking home at

night. Just over half feel positive about household finances, despite the recession. A third do some form of voluntary work. 80 per cent have access to the internet at home. 60 per cent of us own our own homes. Only a fifth of us now smoke. Half describe ourselves as Christians and almost half believe climate change is an urgent problem we need to do something about. This is a nation whose glass is half full, not half empty.

Of course the opposition parties have seized on the empty end of the glass. They've been pointing out, for instance, that parents' satisfaction with schools has fallen below 80 per cent for the first time for years. And although overall crime is at a 40 year low, more than 10 per cent of households continue to be bothered by drug misusers and rowdy behaviour.

On Thursday, the Chief Constable of Scotland, Sir Stephen House, surprised everyone (or no-one? Ed.) by [announcing that he's to resign](#) in December, nine months before the end of his contract. And it isn't because of rowdy behaviour. He is the first chief constable of the new Police Scotland, after the merger of the eight regional police forces in 2013, and – to put it mildly – his period in office has been controversial.

There was considerable opposition to the merger in the first place but the new force made a number of early errors. It deployed armed officers on routine patrols without any public announcement. It had an aggressive policy of stop-and-search, especially in Glasgow. It failed to explain the sudden death of a black man arrested in Kirkcaldy last May. And in July, a young couple died after police took three days to respond to reports that their car had skidded off the M9 near Stirling. Too many mistakes in too short a time; the man at the top had to go.

The row between the BBC and the SNP has been rumbling on this week. It began with Alex Salmond accusing the BBC of behaving "like Pravda" during the referendum campaign. The BBC's Nick

Robinson hit back by accusing the SNP of organising a Putin-style protest outside the BBC's headquarters in Glasgow which was designed to intimidate its journalists. By the end of the week, Nicola Sturgeon was calling for a "federal" BBC with a separate TV channel for Scotland and a second radio channel.

But in this final Festival week, I don't want to give the impression of a divided and moaning Scotland. There were two heart-warming stories that caught my eye. One was that red squirrels are to be introduced into ten new areas in the west Highlands. It's to be organised by the Highland Foundation for Wildlife and the Trees for Life charity and it follows the pioneering work of the naturalist Roy Dennis who has shown it can be done in woodlands near Dundonnell.

The other story concerns a man I met while I was a cub reporter on the Alloa Advertiser almost 40 years ago. Colonel Frank Saunders was a quiet, old-style army officer, who had survived Dunkirk, fought with the 8th Army in North Africa and served for over 20 years with the Royal Engineers. In the 1960s and 70s he was a free-thinking Conservative Councillor in the then Central Region. He died 18 months ago at the age of 106 and this week we learned that he left most of his estate, some £750,000, to his old school Glasgow Academy to help towards the cost of building of its new science and technology department. Now that's the kind of Glasgow spirit I would like to see celebrated.