

Letter from Scotland



Che Sturgeon – leading the revolution

Comrade Nicola Sturgeon is leading the revolution once again. She has called all the Soviets together to declare that Scotland stands ready to take its share of the refugees from Syria and the other troubled regions of the Middle East and North Africa. So today representatives from all the political parties and from local councils, the refugee agencies, churches, mosques, civil rights and children's charities [will meet to discuss](#) how to pressurise the British government into accepting more refugees and how they might be settled across the towns and cities of Scotland.

On Thursday, Ms Sturgeon told MSPs at First Minister's Questions: "I am angry, very angry, at the 'walk on by' attitude of the UK government and I implore David Cameron to change his position. I pledge as First Minister of this country that we stand ready to offer sanctuary to refugees who need our help." She said she wasn't the only one to be moved to tears by the photograph in the press of the body of a small refugee boy washed up on a beach in Turkey.

But she didn't mention how many refugees Scotland would be prepared to accept. And numbers are crucial to the moral debate taking place across Europe about our response to the refugee crisis. The Labour Party leadership contenders are talking about accepting 10,000, but this is just a quarter of the number Germany is taking from Syria alone and small compared to the total number of migrants (as opposed to refugees) who came into Britain last year, 330,000 (net).

When she wasn't leading the revolution across Britain, Ms Sturgeon was ushering in a new dawn for Scotland's schools and

its health care, housing and social security systems. On the first day of the new parliamentary session, she was outlining her programme of government, which is not just about the handful of specific bills for this session but reforms which, she hopes, will extend beyond the Scottish parliamentary election in May next year.

There is to be a new testing regime for children in primary and secondary schools, designed to measure the "attainment gap" and make sure it is closing. There's to be more integration of health and social care. And a new Scottish social security system is to be set up to handle the new powers Scotland is getting over housing and disability benefits.

But what the SNP are backing away from – according to hints dropped by Ms Sturgeon in media interviews – is any use of the Scottish Parliament's new powers to raise income tax. There's no suggestion either that the council tax freeze will end any time soon. So there will be no extra money for the better public services the SNP are promising. The UK government's block grant will simply be blamed for any shortcomings. It's a slightly roguish strategy but it appears to be paying off for the SNP who are still riding high in the opinion polls. According to a Mori poll for STV, the SNP now enjoy 55 per cent support, to Labour's 20 per cent. And the poll found that a small majority of Scots (53 per cent) now favour independence.

On Monday, the differences between the UK and the Scottish governments took the form a naval battle in the Firth of Clyde. While the Chancellor George Osborne was announcing new investment at the Royal Navy base at Faslane – home to Britain's nuclear deterrent – Ms Sturgeon was at Ferguson's shipyard in Port Glasgow announcing investment in two new Calmac ferries. Hostilities ceased however later in the day when both politicians welcomed the news that the new Culzean gas field off Aberdeen has been given the go-ahead. It's the

biggest development in the North Sea for a decade.

Scotland's troubled police force suffered another truncheon blow this week with the publication of an internal report into the M9 car accident. It found that staff shortages at police call centres led to a three day delay in responding to the accident which left a young couple dead after their car left the road and plunged down an embankment. The Justice Secretary Michael Matheson made an official apology in parliament and announced that more funds would be made available for recruitment and the planned closure of two call centres, in Aberdeen and Inverness, would be postponed.

Would you believe it? A group of burger van owners are taking North Lanarkshire Council to court in protest at a ban on them selling their junk food close to school premises. I passed a shop yesterday at mid-morning here in Edinburgh which was doing the same and teenagers were emerging with chips, crisps, burger rolls, chocolates, sugar drinks etc. How can we allow a group of self-interested shopkeepers and van owners waste those youngsters' health, and their money, on such rubbish ?

The Scotch Whisky Association is just as bad, crooning over its latest win in the European courts. It's managed to get some sort of interim judgement that the Scottish government's minimum pricing policy, designed to reduce binge drinking, is interfering with their right to "free trade." So let's just carry on shovelling alcohol and fatty foods down our throats!

Finally, I see we have found our missing Covenanters. They've been discovered buried in a mass grave outside Durham Cathedral where they have been "resting" for the last 365 years. It seems they were taken prisoner after losing the battle of Dunbar, marched down to Durham by Cromwell's troops and around 1700 of them were left to starve to death in the cathedral.

Another example of man's inhumanity to man and, as in Syria,

it followed a civil war which should never have happened.