

Letter from Scotland



Not a cloud in the sky at
Edinburgh University

The annual migration of students has begun. The pavements of our great university city are crowded with badly dressed young people wheeling large suitcases or wandering the streets looking for somewhere cheap to eat. One night here in Edinburgh I saw a jolly band of students in white coats, presumably medics, carrying out “research” into pubs in the Lawnmarket.

There are quarter of a million students at Scotland’s 19 universities. That’s about a third of those leaving school, plus the 20,000 students who come from England and the 48,000 who come from overseas. It’s a huge business, worth £6.7bn to the Scottish economy and providing 38,500 jobs. Some of our universities are very good, five of them appearing regularly in the various league tables of the top 200 universities in the world.

But of course this wouldn’t be Scotland if there wasn’t some stooshie going on. There is the usual one about Scottish and overseas students enjoying “free education” but English students having to pay up to £9,000 a year in tuition fees. But this week, the universities have been complaining to the Scottish Parliament about the SNP government’s plans to tighten up their “governance.”

This features concerns over top salaries, a lack of democracy and open administration and the low number of students from disadvantaged backgrounds. The Education Minister Angela Constance says taxpayers expect to see a little more good behaviour from universities in exchange for the £1bn of public funding they receive each year. University principals have

been drawing salaries of £200,000 and above. Strathclyde is reported to be the most generous, paying its man £334,000 last year, an increase of 7 per cent on the year before. This is at a time when most staff have been limited to a 1 per cent rise and some are only earning the so-called living wage of £14,000 a year.

So the government's Education Bill will require trade unions to be represented on university governing bodies and for the chairman (the university principal) to be directly elected by students and staff. This has outraged the principals, of course, who say government interference of this sort will mean universities losing their independence and thus their charitable status – costing up to £450m a year in tax and philanthropic donations. Ms Constance says this is scaremongering nonsense. We await the outcome of this gentle bunfight.

Meanwhile, in the real world, the nation has been celebrating the first anniversary of the great independence referendum. What a lot has changed in this last year. The temporary Yes Café, down the road from my house, is still doing a roaring business. Instead of the No vote killing the SNP “stone dead”, it appears to have galvanised support for independence, now running at just over 50 per cent in the opinion polls. It has almost wiped out the “Better Together” parties in Scotland who are now reduced to one MP each. And it has pushed the Westminster government into implementing its vow to grant Scotland more devolution, a vow which the SNP says is still not being fully fulfilled.



Nicola Sturgeon is busy holding back a wave of nationalist fervour for another referendum soon. “The people will decide when the time is right for another referendum,” she says. By which she presumably means another SNP victory at the polls. But she has also hinted at three issues that might trigger a

new referendum...a No vote in David Cameron's referendum on Britain's continued membership of the European Union, a Yes vote at Westminster on the renewal of Trident nuclear weapons and a failure by the Labour Party to defeat the Tories at the next UK election.

Jeremy Corbyn, in his victory speech after the Labour leadership election, promised he would make winning back Scotland a top priority. He'll have a few Munros to climb, with Labour down to 22 per cent support in the opinion polls. The Corbyn team only has Ian Murray, the lone MP from Edinburgh South, as its Scottish voice. The Scottish Labour leader, Kezia Dugdale, did not want a Corbyn victory and has said quite pointedly that she is in charge of the party north of the border. So we wait to see if Labour can put together a coherent platform on issues such as government austerity, taxation, Europe, further devolution etc.

There's not been much to cheer about this week. The weather might deserve one cheer, we've had some lovely Indian summer days. There will be two cheers for the Murray brothers this weekend in the Davis Cup, and 15 for our team in the Rugby World Cup. But my best cheer of the week was for the 250 horse-riders who took to the streets of Edinburgh last Sunday to "Ride the Marches" a 16th century tradition, revived in 2009. You could certainly smell the boundaries of the city for the rest of the afternoon, despite the council lorry sweeping up behind the horses.



Edinburgh Common Riding
2015