

Letter from Scotland



“All is safely gathered in.”

We are just about at the end our harvest season. It's been two weeks later than usual this year because of the wet summer. But farmers are reporting pretty good yields of wheat and barley, though the whisky companies have had to lower their standards because a lot of the barley crop has been “skinned” by the weather.

Generally, the Scottish farming community reckons it's been skinned this year, as last year, by the supermarkets, and, by extension, us the consumers who are demanding unrealistically low prices for our milk, meat, vegetables and fruit.

Milk is the most famous example, where Scotland's 2000 dairy farmers are getting an average of just 24p a litre for their milk at the farm gate, while it costs them 30-32p to produce and it sells on the supermarket shelves for around 80p.

The average farm income in Scotland was £31,000 last year – not a lot when you take into account all the hard labour the farmer puts in and the risks he takes, not mention the capital employed – a basic farm tractor costs at least £60,000. Without European subsidies, the average farm would have made a loss last year of £16,000.

Scotland's 30,000 farmers (double that, if you count part-timers) are facing another change in the Common Agricultural Policy. From December this year, farm subsidies (around £500m a year in total) will be based on the number of hectares actually in production, not the number of hectares that were in production back in 2002. The new rates will also mean much less of a subsidy for hill farmers. They are meeting in Oban next week to decide what to do about it.

The answer, of course, is for us all to pay more for our food. The average family spends £60 a week on food, or 12 per cent of the weekly budget. Fifty years ago, the figure was 33 per cent. We have to be prepared to pay more for our Scottish labelled food unless we want to leave the business of farming to countries thousands of miles away with cheap labour and a cavalier attitude to animal welfare and the use of pesticides. (and the bees! Ed.)

But no matter what the cost, we learned this week that Scots are still not eating the right food. The Scottish Health Survey found that only 14 per cent of children are eating their recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. We adults are not doing much better, at 20 per cent. The survey also showed that we are still falling short of the recommended "moderate physical activity". Only 76 per cent of children are doing their hour a day and only 63 per cent of adults are doing their recommended two and a half hours a week. Last year's Commonwealth Games were supposed to make us into a healthy nation but alas the above figures are virtually unchanged from the year before. And when asked if the Commonwealth Games had inspired them to take up a sport, only 4 per cent of adults said they were thinking about it.

So the politicians will have to think again about that Games legacy. They have also been thinking again about independence. The leaders of both the Labour Party and the Liberal Democrats have bowed to the inevitable and have granted their members dispensation to campaign for independence if they so wish.

Nicola Sturgeon says it's a desperate attempt to stop the avalanche of Labour and Lib Dem members to the SNP. And she's challenged unionist leaders to say if they would rule out another referendum on independence if circumstances change, such as the UK voting to leave the European Union. She's also been underlining her own European credentials by calling on the UK government to take in more refugees from Syria and to abandon its plan to scrap the Human Rights Act. She's

suggested that the Scottish Parliament could block such a move since the European Convention on Human Rights has been written into Scots law.

The official unemployment figures may be holding steady at 5.9 per cent but there are still signs of a shaky jobs market. The seafood company Young's confirmed this week that it will shed 650 jobs at its processing plants in Fraserburgh and Grantown-on-Spey. When ScotRail announced they were looking for 100 new train drivers, they got 12,000 applications. Scottish Natural Heritage was also deluged with applications when it advertised for 10 part-time goose counters on Islay at just £9.37 an hour.

Scotland's sporting stars have been earning their keep this week. The Murray brothers have taken Britain through to the final of the Davis Cup after a magnificent win against Australia in Glasgow. And the Scotland rugby team saw off the giant-killers from Japan, 45-10, in the World Cup and now face that well known rugby nation, the USA.

If you are of a certain age you may be glad to hear that the Bay City Rollers have re-entered the jobs market after 40 years. Scotland's first boy-band, or at least three of them, are getting together again to launch a new album and embark on a re-union world tour. It will begin at the Barrowland in Glasgow in December and go on to Japan, Sweden and America.

So "Shang-A-Lang" to all Scots everywhere. (and there are now extra dates added in Glasgow as the first concert sold out in three minutes!)