

Letter from Scotland



A glass of cheer or
catastrophe

Sometimes I regret being tee-total, but not this week. Edinburgh is hosting a world conference on alcohol policy with 500 experts from Europe, Asia and America all considering the question – how do we stop drinking ourselves to death? They calculate that 3.3 million people across the world die each year from alcohol related causes. And a lot of Scots are among them – 1,152 last year.

We are one of the world's hard drinking nations. We buy a fifth more alcohol per head than the English or the Welsh. And we tend to drink it in those famous weekend binges. According to Scottish government statistics, half the men in Scotland and a third of the women drink more than the recommended amount of alcohol each week. It costs our economy £3.6 billion in lost production, NHS costs, social work spending and petty crime – that's £900 per taxpayer. Three quarters of young offenders are drunk at the time of their crime.

A lot has been said about Scotland's "relationship" with alcohol. The Scottish government says it's taken 40 measures, so to speak, to reduce alcohol consumption. Among them is the lowering of the alcohol limit for driving from 80mg per 100ml of blood to 50mg. Even in my limited experience, this has changed social habits quite markedly in the last few months – people will not even take half a glass of wine if they are driving home.

Then there is the vexed issue of minimum pricing – making it an offence to sell alcohol at less than 50p/unit, raising the price of 60 per cent of drinks sold in off-sales and supermarkets. But, despite being the will of parliament, this

policy has been held up for the past two years by a legal challenge from the Scotch Whisky Association.

So this “relationship” is indeed a very liquid one –flowing in different directions at the same time. On the one hand, a good drink can quench a thirst, quicken a friendship, jolly an occasion, ease a pain, drown a sorrow. But, taken in excess, it can deepen a depression, cloud a judgement, ruin a liver, soil a pavement, commit a crime. And many Scots seem not be able to drink in moderation, we either drink too much or not drink at all.

In one respect at least, the Scottish Government has been drinking a toast to the Chancellor of the Exchequer. George Osborne announced at the Conservative Party conference on Monday that he was loosening the purse strings on infrastructure spending. This will mean £500m more for Scotland and we wait to see which road, rail, water projects will get the go-ahead as a result.

We also wait to see if the Conservatives can recast themselves as “the People’s Party” in Scotland, as they are trying to do in Jeremy Corbyn’s England. The party leader here, Ruth Davidson, has predicted “a record number” of Conservative MSPs in the Scottish parliamentary elections next May. But there are several Munros for the Tories to climb between now and then – not least the divisions over Europe and immigration, the continuing strength the SNP in the opinion polls and the re-emerging Labour Party.

One piece of infrastructure which hit the news this week was the new bridge being built across the Forth. Workers found what looked like old explosives at a demolition site they were clearing just north of the bridge. The existing Forth bridges had to be hurriedly closed for an hour on Wednesday while a controlled explosion was carried out. Roads around the area will be closed again on three weekends later this month to allow work to be done on the feeder roads to the new £1.6

billion crossing.

And more infrastructure news – I can report that the new £300m Borders Railway is well worth a day out. For £11.20, off-peak return, we were treated to 30 miles of beautiful rolling countryside and a smart new terminus at Tweedbank. The train seemed to be well used, indeed, it had double the expected number of passengers in the first month. It's just a pity there is hardly any room for bikes, a fault on all Scot Rail services.

We learned this week that Tweedbank is to be the permanent home for the Great Tapestry of Scotland. Councillors have approved a special £6m visitor centre to house the history of the nation, stitched in 165 pictures.

One picture it will not contain is Scotland competing in the European football finals. With typical and exasperating bad luck, we went out in a two-all draw with Poland that was oh so close. We were 2-1 ahead when the Polish magician Robert Lewandowski scored with the last kick of the game. The crowd at Hampden Park sank into the ground and have not been seen since.

Another man who saw his hopes sink without trace was the English yachtsman 82 year-old Julian Mustoe. His 25ft boat, the Harrier, ran into stormy weather 100 miles off Shetland on Wednesday and lost its steering. Mustoe himself was rescued, but his boat sank while under tow to Norway.

He had lived alone on board the Harrier for the last ten years and had sailed round the world, following in the wake of Charles Darwin's voyage of the Beagle. He was hoping to have one last adventure, tracing the old Hanseatic League trading routes around the Baltic. "I'm beginning to think my luck has run out," he told reporters. "What I'm going to do with myself I don't know."

I think he should allow himself a little drink and retire to a

country steeped in dreams of what might have been. (or maybe someone should start a fundraising campaign to buy him a new boat? Ed)