

Letter from Scotland



Remembrance Sunday always stops me in my tracks. I see the names on the war memorials, I see yellow leaves on the green grass, I see the familiar ceremonies on television and I wonder at man's stupidity. Why are we unable to see the madness of war coming before we are drawn into it ?

The First World War is the most haunting for me, because of its mystery and for its huge impact on every town and village in Scotland to this day. My grandfather served in the Royal Army Medical Corps, my great uncle was killed at the second battle of the Somme. We are still connected to this most awful of wars. It was only six years ago that the last British soldier to serve in the trenches Harry Patch died, just short of his 100th birthday.

The Second World War is easier to understand, with its clear-cut conflict between good and evil. My grandfather and my uncle both served in this war and survived. But the losses were six times those of the First War and most of the casualties were not soldiers at all but innocent bystanders.

Despite these two catastrophic conflicts, we have not been able to shake off the contagion of war, a disease peculiar to our species. Since the First World War, Britain has been involved in 30 major wars. And throughout the world, as I write, there are 35 wars going on, four of them major wars, in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Boko Haram war in West Africa, each of which resulted in more than 10,000 people killed last year. And still we sell arms to the evil tyrants causing these wars and we mock the efforts of the UN and the EU to bring them to an end.

This week, The Scottish Parliament debated the renewal of Trident nuclear weapons, which can either be seen as a costly example of this war madness, or as the ultimate guarantee of peace between the major powers. Scottish Labour, newly converted to the anti-Trident cause, voted with the SNP,

against any renewal of Trident. This week we learnt that the cost had gone up yet again, to £25 billion plus 6 per cent of the annual defence budget for maintenance, which would put the final bill at £167 billion.

Another of the Scottish Labour Party's innovations this week was to come out strongly against the Chancellor's cuts to tax credits, which they said would leave a quarter of a million low-earning households a thousand pounds worse off each year. The party leader Kezia Dugdale said Labour in Scotland would reverse these cuts by not cutting Air Passenger Duty and not raising the threshold for the upper rate of income tax.

Until Wednesday, the SNP maintained that the Scottish Parliament did not have the power to make these changes but then Alex Neil, the social justice secretary, admitted he'd been reading the new devolution bill again and, lo and behold, he'd found that Holyrood will indeed have such powers from next year. This left the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon simply promising MSPs, at question time, that the Scottish government would come up with a "realistic and affordable" scheme to compensate those affected by the tax credit changes – if the Chancellor can't be persuaded out of them.

Oh dear, the Scottish economy is not doing as well as expected. The number crunchers at the Fraser of Allander Institute now say our annual growth rate for 2015 is likely to be 1.9 per cent, not the 2.5 per cent they had confidently predicted in the summer. This comes on top of last month's bad news from the oil and steel industries and the rise in unemployment to 6.1 per cent. We are now relying on the building trade to drive growth in the economy. And, of course, there will very soon be the Christmas stampede by the ever brave Scottish shoppers who have kept our heads above water throughout the recession.

The off-shore wind industry is also doing its bit to keep the economy afloat. This week the world's largest floating wind farm was given permission to launch 25 miles off the coast of Peterhead. There will be five floating turbines, anchored to the seabed, capable of powering 20,000 homes. It's a

pioneering project for deep sea energy production. It's just a pity it's being done by enterprising Norwegians from Statoil, rather than a Scottish energy company.

I end with a Boy's Own tale. Poor Susie Wolff, the Scottish racing driver, is a girl. This means she is not welcome in the boy's world of Formula One racing. She announced this week that she is retiring from the sport after 20 years of trying to break through the glass ceiling. She wrote revealingly: "I fought very hard to make it onto that starting grid (for the Williams Team) but events at the start of this year and the current environment in F1 the way it is, it isn't going to happen."

Perhaps she is just too sensible for the mad world of motor racing. To me it's a crazy mixture of micro-engineering, dubious big money, kamikaze drivers, ghoulish blood sport, celebrity, television and childish fantasy. You may have gathered that I don't like it.