

Letter from Scotland



Bridge over troubled water

It's one of the great icons of modern Scotland. So when the great silver bridge flying over the Firth of Forth is broken, it's a little embarrassing.

Some over- excited politicians have called it a "disaster", which it is not. No one fell into the water. It's not like the Tay Bridge Disaster of 1879 when a train full of people plunged into the river during a December storm. But the Forth Road Bridge being closed for repairs till the New Year is inconvenient for the 65,000+ drivers who use it every day.

And that's the problem. The bridge was only designed to take 30,000 vehicles a day. So when The Scottish Government begins its expected inquiry into what's gone wrong, it could well start by asking why we've allowed so many vehicles – and in particular trucks – to use the bridge each day. It was bound to wear out long before its 120 year life span. If I was the bridge-master, I'd send all heavy lorries around by the Stirling or Clackmannan bridges. You only have to walk over the Forth Bridge to feel the thundering effect these heavy vehicles have on its light, elegant structure.

Other questions the MSPs might like to ask are: was it wise to remove the tolls in 2008, instead of increasing them ? Was it correct to go for the cheaper option when repairs were made in 2010 ? What can be done to stop the bridge developing further faults ?

But, of course, being short-term politicians, their "focused" inquiry is likely to ask: who was to blame? Has the transport minister, young Derek MacKay, been misleading us? Will the repairs work? And what will they cost? And can we

get the new bridge built earlier than the end of next year?

We had further evidence of our broken climate system this week with more flooding in the Borders, Dumfriesshire and Stirlingshire. In Hawick 600 people had to leave their homes when the River Teviot burst its banks. Over 100mm of rain fell in the Borders last Friday and Saturday. The government has announced an emergency fund of nearly £4m to help with the clear up in Scotland.

Ironically, the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon travelled (by train of course) to the UN Climate Change summit in Paris to explain what Scotland was doing to reduce carbon emissions. She promised a 42 per cent reduction by 2020, even though we appear to have missed our targets for the last three years. She also announced that Scotland's Climate Justice fund would be doubled to £12m over the next four years, helping poor countries in Africa cope with increasing droughts.

The sums involved – for drought and floods – are tiny, compared with the problems faced at home and abroad but they are, at least, a token of our concern. That in turn raises the question of whether you believe in token politics or not. There are arguments on both sides.

What we should insist on, though, is honesty in politics. And I'm afraid the MP for Orkney and Shetland Alistair Carmichael has failed that test. This week two judges in a rarely-convened election court found that he had told "a blatant lie" in denying he was the source of leaked government memo about Nicola Sturgeon. Strangely, the court also concluded that because the lie was "political and not personal" it did not invalidate his election on May 7th.

I cannot myself understand this fine legal distinction. A lie is a lie. We might expect politicians to be economical with the truth – ie they may only tell us half the story – but Carmichael went further and told an outright lie. In my view

he has brought his party into disrepute and the Liberal Democrats should have thrown him out. And he himself should have resigned long ago as an MP. It is outrageous that the four constituents who took him to court should have to raise around £200,000 to pay the legal fees.

And while I'm in this good Presbyterian mood, can I condemn another of my fellow mortals, Harry Clarke? He was the driver who fainted at the wheel of a bin lorry which went out of control in the centre of Glasgow last Christmas and killed six people. The Fatal Accident Inquiry has concluded that the tragedy could have been avoided if Clarke had not repeatedly lied about his medical condition when applying for the job and a driving licence.

The sad thing about this case is that, in my view, Mr Clarke was badly advised by his lawyers to say nothing at the inquiry for fear of prejudicing any criminal proceedings against him. It meant that Mr Clarke was unable to come clean and apologise properly to the families of those who died, leaving them so unsatisfied that they are pursuing a private prosecution against him. This is prolonging the agony for everyone...except, of course, the lawyers themselves.

One man I don't feel sorry for is Donald Trump. He's been stripped of his role as a "business ambassador" for Scotland in protest at his call for all Muslims to be refused entry to the United States. He's also had his honorary degree from Aberdeen's Robert Gordon University withdrawn. Why he was ever offered either honour puzzles me.

As one of his rivals for the Republican nomination Jeb Bush rightly said, the man is "unhinged." And to quote Lewis Carroll at his famous tea party: "Besides," said the Mad Hatter, "his hair wants cutting !"