

Letter from Scotland



Lighten our darkness on the
Old Dalkeith Road

'Tis the season of coloured lights and cheerful dispositions. The homes around me are decorated with flashing Santa Clauses, reindeer, Christmas trees, Yule wreaths and many other glittering distractions. It's all in defiance of the winter darkness and whatever troubles the householders inside may have. Christmas is a time when we can pause and put things in context, to balance light against darkness.

Looking though my diary for the past year, I find myself saying "Thank goodness I live in Scotland and not in other parts of the world." This week, for instance, we were treated to a budget speech by our Finance Secretary, John Swinney, which outlined Scottish Government spending of some £30 billion. We are not a poor country. In fact, according to the International Monetary Fund, we are living in the 14th richest country in the world.

In this context the rows at Holyrood pale into insignificance. And there have been rows – over the cut of 2 per cent in local government funding, over Mr Swinney's decision not to use his new power to raise income tax by a penny or two in the pound, over his continuing freeze of the council tax, over the announcement of an extra tax on second homes. All of which we will hear plenty about in the run-up to the Scottish elections in six months' time.

But back to my diary. I see that 2015 began with the usual storms. A cargo ship went down in the Pentland Firth with the loss of its 8-man crew. And the storms kept coming. We have even started naming them, American style.

The latest, Storm Desmond, caused severe flooding in the Borders and Dumfriesshire. Last year was the wettest ever recorded in Britain and 2015 is on target to exceed that. It's expected to be the windiest. But at least we are not subject to the cyclones such as the one which devastated the low-lying islands of Vanuatu in March.

Climate change, of course, has been one of the big issues of the year. We saw Nicola Sturgeon strutting our stuff at the UN summit in Paris earlier this month, boasting about Scotland's world-leading target of cutting carbon emissions by 42 per cent by 2020. Unfortunately we have missed our interim targets for the last four years. But never mind, we saw the demolition of the chimney stacks at the old coal-fired power station at Cockenzie in September and next April we will be closing down the last such power station at Longannet, which may put us back on track, despite our addiction to car travel.



The end of the age of coal,
Cockenzie power station

On the 7th of January, my diary records that the offices of the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo were attacked by two Islamic extremists. Eleven people were killed. At the beginning of February, my diary records that a Jordanian pilot was burned to death by Islamic State militants in Iraq, one of several ritual killings. In June, 30 British tourists were killed at a beach resort in Tunisia, by terrorists inspired by IS. At the end of October, a Russian plane carrying tourists home from an Egyptian resort was brought down by a Jihadist's bomb. All 244 people on board died. Then a few days later, came the Paris shootings in which 131 people were killed.

All this slaughter of the innocents has finally awakened governments in the West to the turmoil in the Middle East. There's been yet another declaration of a "war on terror" and

on 2 December, MPs voted to send British planes to bomb IS targets in Syria. The SNP voted against, saying there was no overall strategy for winning the war against IS or for what should happen if IS is defeated. Since then of course Russia has entered the war and Saudi Arabia has convened a meeting of neighbouring states to edge towards a peace settlement.

European governments also had a rude awakening to the four-year long civil war in Syria when over 800,000 refugees arrived on their borders. Over 3,000 drowned in their attempt to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Around 6,000 are camped at Calais trying to cross the North Sea to Britain.

So far, Britain has only promised to take in 20,000 refugees over the next four years. The first thousand are already here, a hundred of them in Scotland. On the 2nd September my diary records the picture of 3 year old Aylan Kurdi a Syrian boy, whose body was found washed up on a beach in Turkey as his family tried to flee to Europe. It has become one of the most haunting memories of 2015.

On the economic front, this has been the year of zero, or near zero, inflation. My diary records the date as 24th March when the figure slipped to zero itself. By May, we were into deflationary territory for the first time since 1960. Meanwhile, unemployment has been falling, but only slightly in Scotland, from 5.7 per cent in January to 5.6 per cent in this month's figures. In short, the Scottish economy has not been recovering well and has slipped behind the UK as whole. In particular our oil industry has been evaporating as world oil prices have fallen to less than \$50 a barrel.

My diary entries chart the political year from the UK general election of May 7th when the Conservatives won a surprising victory. But not in Scotland...in fact they only won one seat. So too did the Liberal Democrats. But the sensation was the collapse of Labour to just one MP – my own Ian Murray here in

the Socialist Republic of leafy Edinburgh South. The SNP won 56 seats and still dominate the opinion polls to this day. Nicola Sturgeon was the star of the show even though she herself was not standing in the Westminster elections.

✘ Since then of course, we have had the young Kezia Dugdale elected to lead Scottish Labour and on September 12th, Jeremy Corbyn led his revolutionary forces to an astonishing victory in the UK Labour leadership race. Everyone, including Labour MPs, is still trying to work out what all this will mean for the Labour Party. Will it turn sharply to the left? Will it be electable?

And finally, to that other armchair sport...sport itself. Both football and athletics have disgraced themselves this year. Sepp Blatter and his cronies at FIFA headquarter have been hunted out of office by fraud investigators from America. And the world athletics body IAAF has been found napping over the issue of doping in sport. Its new president Lord Coe is struggling to win back public trust.

On the field, Scotland has not had a great year either. In football we failed to qualify for the European championships and in the rugby World Cup we were unlucky and knocked out by Australia in the quarterfinals. However in the unlikely sport of tennis, we won the Davis Cup, thanks to the Murray brothers from Dunblane. Who can forget that cheeky last lob by Andy Murray right over the head of Belgium's David Goffin?

And so I close my diary for 2015. A rather frightening and disappointing year is over when we faced climate change, terrorism, political excitement and economic uncertainty. Still, it is Christmas and all is well.

Just keep the coloured lights turned on.