

Letter from Scotland



A hundred days to Waterloo

All this talk of “100 days” has alarmed me. It’s referring, of course, to the run-up to the Scottish elections on 5 May but somehow it sounds more cataclysmic...like a great flood or the end of an era or a regime !

I first heard the phrase at school when studying Napoleon’s 100 days, between his escape from Elba and his defeat at Waterloo. But I heard it more recently when I attended a performance of Waterloo battle songs staged in Kirkton Village Hall in Dumfriesshire. And then again last weekend, when I played in my local orchestra’s workshop on Beethoven’s 3rd symphony, the Eroica.

Beethoven at first dedicated it to Napoleon as the citizen-hero fighting for “liberty, equality and fraternity.” But the dedication was withdrawn when Beethoven learned that Napoleon had crowned himself Emperor and become a tyrant.

A lot can happen in 100 days. But as things stand now, the SNP will be the conquerors and the opposition parties are riding towards their Waterloos. The opinion polls put the SNP support at over 50 per cent, while Labour are struggling to get above 20 per cent. The Conservatives come a surprising third at about 17 per cent support and the Greens and the Liberal Democrats are trailing at less than 10 per cent. It seems the SNP have hung on to the support they gathered during the independence referendum in 2014, 45 per cent of the vote, and they are still adding to it. Over the past few weeks there’s been an unseemly scramble among opposition politicians for “list seats”, the second-vote regional seats where voting is by proportional representation.

Already the battle lines are becoming clear. The first is a debate over hope versus despair. The SNP continue to offer hope...hope that the Westminster austerity programme can be overturned, that the price of oil will rise again, that public services can be preserved by "reforms". The other parties despair at this Panglossian approach to politics.

The second battle line is over spending versus taxation. This week the Liberal Democrats became the first to put their heads above the parapet on taxation. They are calling for an extra 1p on income tax to pay for £475m of new spending on education. The Conservatives have almost gone the other way, hinting at a 10 per cent cut in the income tax rate for middle income earners "if possible" and a cut in local business rates. This is all to be paid for by that happy policy of "growing the economy". The SNP have chickened out of tampering with either income tax or council tax.

Hardly a day goes by, of course, without one party or another promising to spend more on public services...without saying where the money is coming from. A suspicious accountant would tell you they are often spending it twice over. But what is refreshing about the election this time is that the Holyrood Parliament now has the realistic power to raise or lower taxes. In theory it's always had the power to alter income tax but it has never had the guts to use it. Now the "Calman" reforms are putting the politicians on the spot and there are more devolved powers to come next year.

On Thursday the Prime Minister noticed we were into the last 100 days and broke off from his European travels to go to Aberdeen to help launch the "[City Deal](#)". £250m of public money will be pumped into the city and shire to compensate for the downturn in the oil industry. It will pay for diversification projects in alternative energy, food production, bio-science and tourism. The Scottish Government is adding another £250m to fund better road, rail and broadband connections for the North East.

To add to the sense of catastrophe which, as I say, comes with talk of 100 days, another mighty storm is about to hit Scotland. As I write storm "Gertrude" is blowing in, just days after another deluge struck us – the leftovers from a storm which buried parts of the east coast of the USA in record snowfalls. Here, it brought renewed flooding to Hawick and Jedburgh in the Borders. [Lorries](#) were blown over on the A1, rail and ferry services along the west coast were cancelled, and in Edinburgh a [chimney pot](#) fell onto a bus, injuring one of the passengers, just up the road from where I live.

Gertrude has already caused the cancellation of rail and ferry services in the North West and schools are closed in the Islands. We are battening down for 70mph winds and yet more rain.

This is indeed an exciting 100 days.