

Letter from Scotland



Much ado about "in" or
"out".

Mention the word "referendum" in Scotland and you'd better duck behind the stockade because the empty Irn Bru cans will come flying. But it looks like we are going to get another one, if not in June, then in the autumn, depending how David Cameron's negotiations go in Brussels today.

So where does Scotland stand on membership of the European Union? The opinion polls, disconcertingly, are all over the place. Some put support for the EU at over 60 per cent, others say it's more like 40 per cent. All are agreed however that there are a lot of undecided voters and that the gap between the two sides is narrowing.

Romantics say that Scotland has always been an outward-looking country, with long historic ties to France, the Netherlands, the Baltic countries and with the world in general. We still do most of our trade with Europe – £12 billion at the last count. America is next, and a long way behind, with trade worth £4 billion.

But actually, we don't have huge links with the Continent. Not many of us speak other European languages. There are only 60,000 EU citizens working in Scotland – despite the influx of Poles, Czechs, Latvians and others in recent years. We have 13,000 European students at Scottish universities but hardly any Scots study abroad. We don't even play football in Europe any more.

We know the European Union largely through its agriculture and fishing policies and the occasional new road in the Highlands and Islands. Business leaders complain about EU bureaucracy,

but most of them want Britain to stay in. Indeed the “Stronger in” campaign has already started work in Scotland, chaired by the Muslim academic Professor Mona Siddiqui and directed by the former Labour MP Frank Roy. The “Leave” campaign is “in embryonic form” to put it generously, though there is a Labour Party “Leave” campaign headed by the former MP Nigel Griffiths.

In short, it’s not clear how the European referendum will go in Scotland. We first have to battle through our own Scottish Parliamentary election on 5 May. The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has called for the EU referendum to be postponed till the autumn out of “respect” for Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish voters who will have to contend with two campaigns running at the same time. To complicate matters, she has also hinted that if Scotland votes to stay in the EU but England votes to leave, that might be ground enough for a second referendum on independence. Then the Irn-Bru cans really will start flying.

Speaking of our own election campaign, the Finance Secretary John Swinney is still locked in talks with the UK treasury over the “fiscal framework”, the new deal on tax powers which are coming to Scotland next year. He is off to London for further discussions today.

Meanwhile the First Minister announced a £75m fund to try to save Scotland’s manufacturing industry which is looking more anaemic every day. Since the beginning of the year we’ve seen hundreds of jobs at risk at Tata Steelworks in Lanarkshire, Texas Instruments in Greenock, Polaroid Eyewear in Dundee and Hawick Knitwear in the Borders.

Scotland’s unemployment rate now stands at 5.8 per cent, compared to 5.1 per cent in the UK as a whole. Yet, despite all this, there have never been more people in work, 2.6 million people, nearly 75 per cent of all those of working age.

Jobs which have been saved include the 700 staff at Torness nuclear power station on the East Lothian coast. Its French owners, EDF, announced this week that they are to extend its life till 2030. I remember it being built, some 30 years ago, amid much controversy. Then, the worry was over safety, now the worry is cost. The anti-nuclear campaigners say the subsidy given to nuclear is a distraction from investing in renewable energy for the future.

This week has brought tragedy in the Scottish hills. Two men in their 70s died when they were forced to spend the night in freezing conditions after they got lost in a snowstorm in the Lowther Hills in southern Scotland. Another man died in an avalanche on Creag Meagaidh, north of Fort William. And on Ben Nevis, the search is still going on, as I write, for a young couple who've been missing for nearly a week.

Even here in Edinburgh, the weather has been cold and windy, with occasional sleet showers. On one such day this week I was working as usual at my local wildlife reserve, at Duddingston Loch, when a hungry sparrow-hawk flew into one of our cars. He entered by one window, sat for a moment on the dashboard, and then flew out the opposite window. We reckon he thought he'd seen food in the car.

The whole incident lasted hardly a second but it reminded me of something the Venerable Bede said: "Our present life is like the swift flight of a sparrow through the room where you sit at supper in winter, flying in one door and immediately out at another."

Suddenly life's daily triumphs and disasters fall into context.