

Letter from Scotland



They stretch in never
ending line

The daffodils are still blooming, telling us that despite Easter being over, we are only at the beginning of spring. Like young lambs, the weather is skipping along, cheerful but unreliable. The same as our election campaign.

But before we get on to politics, I have to report a truly shocking murder. On 24th March, a well-loved Glasgow shop-keeper, Asad Shah, was killed outside his convenience store in Shawlands. A man from Bradford was quickly arrested and this week he claimed responsibility for the murder and said he'd done it because Mr Shah had "disrespected the messenger of Islam, the Prophet Muhammad."

In a long statement, read by his solicitor outside the court, Tanveer Ahmed said: "If I had not done this, others would and there would have been more killing and violence in the world." Mr Shah's "disrespect" apparently consisted of being a member of a liberal Islamic sect and issuing a notice on Facebook wishing his customers "a very happy Easter and especially to my beloved Christian nation."

Now it's true that Mr Ahmed from Bradford may only be claiming to have carried out the killing. The police have yet to present their evidence in court. It may also be true that he is a one-off madman. But then so were the killers of Fusilier Lee Rigby in London. And what causes a man from Bradford to become so obsessed about "disrespect" for the Prophet Muhammad that he travels to Glasgow to kill – or claim to kill – a quiet, well-respected man innocently wishing his neighbours a Happy Easter. The evil of jihadism is obviously alive in some parts of Britain and it has just visited Scotland.

Not much wonder people are put off religion. This week we learned that 52 per cent of Scots told the latest Social Attitudes Survey they were not religious. That's up from 40 per cent in 1999. The Church of Scotland was the biggest loser with membership falling from 35 per cent of the population in 1999 to just 20 per cent today.

Out on the election trail, there's still no sign that the SNP are going to lose their majority in the Scottish Parliament on May 5th. Nicola Sturgeon still has the aura of Joan of Arc leading her forces to victory. However, the latest opinion poll, by TNS, puts the SNP at 56 per cent support, down 4 per cent on last time and in the second-vote regional poll, it is down 8 per cent at 47 per cent. It's not Labour who are gaining, surprisingly, but the smaller parties – the Tories, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats.

Ms Sturgeon has run into trouble over her dealings with China. First it emerged that she'd signed a deal last month with two Chinese construction companies who are contemplating up to £10 billion worth of investment in Scottish infrastructure projects. Then it turned out that one of the companies involved had a bribery scandal hanging over it. Ms Sturgeon explained that no specific project had yet been agreed and "due diligence" investigations would be carried out at that stage.

Meanwhile Labour's Kezia Dugdale was fending off allegations that she had changed course on her rebate for low-income tax payers and that she was willing to contemplate Scottish independence if Britain withdrew from the European Union.

There was a happy distraction mid-week when the Edinburgh Festival director, the chirpy Irishman Fergus Linehan announced details of this summer's programme. He's stirred some lighter ingredients into the mix this year with star appearances from actor Alan Cumming and comedian Barry Humphries. There's also to be more contemporary music and

Scottish music. He's continuing last year's experiment with a spectacular opening ceremony, this time with a sound and light show around the 350m year old rock on which Edinburgh Castle sits. It's to be called "Deep Time" and will explore the geology of the rock and the first man to explain its origin James Hutton.

There was further light relief when Rangers finally made it back into the Premier League with a 1-0 victory over Dumbarton on Tuesday night. It's taken them four years and £30m to struggle back up through the divisions since they were sent back to square one for their oh-so-clever tax avoidance scheme. Their redemption is all the more remarkable when you remember the boardroom shenanigans and legal black holes the club fell into on the way.

And so with a spring in our step we tip-toe through the daffodils towards the next exciting or alarming week of Scottish history.