

# Letter from Scotland



“The Shepherdess” by  
Johann Baptist  
Hofner (1832-1913)

Can our national shepherdess save her flock? I am, of course, referring to the SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon, or to Kezia Dugdale the Labour leader, or to Ruth Davidson the Tory leader, or to our 90 year old Queen, whichever is the politically-correct choice at this delicate time. (It almost goes without saying that men have no large role in our current election campaign, they just lead the small parties.)

But I am also referring to a particular case. What was the first minister doing last Sunday night when 450 sheep were stolen from a hillside near the Grey Mare’s Tail in Dumfriesshire? Where were her police officers when the sheep rustlers’ lorries were spiriting away £60,000 worth of Cheviot ewes?

Scottish crime figures may be at a 41 year low, but apparently the ancient crime of sheep rustling is on the increase. Between 2012 and 2014, over 11,500 sheep and other livestock were stolen from Scottish farms. In the case of the ewes, it’s not just the sheep that are lost, but their lambs and next year’s lambs. And it’s not easy to replace a flock which has been hefted to a particular hillside.

But to be fair, crime is not a big issue in this campaign. Jobs and the economy are. This week we learnt that unemployment has risen by over 20,000 to 6.2 per cent, way above the UK average of 5.1 per cent. And that’s before the latest job losses in the oil industry are taken into account and the closure of the Carron Iron Works in Falkirk, one of the icons of Scotland’s industrial revolution – latterly

reduced to making kitchen sinks. It follows a series of pessimistic predictions about the Scottish economy in the last few weeks.

It also comes against the rumbling sound of the collapse of the public sector, as the Chancellor's austerity cuts continue to result in serious job losses, 50,000 at the last count. Not surprisingly, all the parties, except the Tories, are promising to "end austerity" by putting up taxes and spending more on education and health.

This week we got the SNP manifesto. It promises to spend £750m extra on education over the next five years and £500m on health, all to be paid for by not raising the 40 per cent tax threshold as the Chancellor has planned. It also promises to double the amount of free childcare and reduce carbon emissions by 50 per cent. Interestingly, it suggests there may well be a second referendum on independence if "there is clear and sustained evidence that the people want it."

We've now had manifestos from the Tories, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, Rise (the latest alliance of socialist parties) and UKIP. Labour are slow off the mark but will publish their manifesto next week. Curiously, both the SNP and Labour are coming out with their promises after many people have already cast their postal votes ! Which adds weight to the pundits' suggestion that the 45 per cent of the population who supported independence in the 2014 referendum will automatically vote for the SNP, leaving the rest of the parties to divide the 55 per cent among themselves.

One job which is not subject to the whim of the electorate is the manager of Celtic Football Club. Norwegian Ronny Deila announced his resignation this week after a poor season of results and a lack-luster performance against their old rivals Rangers last Sunday. The hunt is on for the new man and every conjuror in the business is being touted in the press – Neil Lennon, David Moyes, Roy Keane, Henrick Larsson. But can they

work their magic without a large treasure chest to buy in international players ? Discuss.

Another job which is not subject to the whim of the electorate is, of course, the Queen's. Ironically, if it was, she would be elected with a 90 per cent majority, way above even Shepherdess Sturgeon's rating of 71 per cent and above the support for the monarchy itself at around 70 per cent.

Until this week I thought I knew everything there was to know about the Queen. But among the column inches and television hours given over to her 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, was the intriguing fact that she can speak "The Doric." Her first cousin Margaret Rhodes told Radio 4 that the Queen "is a very good mimic. She can do the Norfolk and Aberdeenshire accents beautifully and often pretends to be a gamekeeper." Weel, weel, we a' ken noo.