

Letter from Scotland



Jumping through hoops on
the way to Holyrood

We are about to take another leap forward in the never-ending journey towards Home Rule. The politicians have been diving through hoops to entertain us on this pilgrimage, and on Thursday (5th May) the campaign will end and we will all vote.

Well, perhaps not all of us. At the last Scottish elections in 2011, the turnout was only 51 per cent. I guess it will be much the same this time, despite the “politicisation” of the nation during the independence referendum 18 months ago. I say this because there’s not much sign of the election in the streets.....few posters, not many window stickers, people shuffle quickly past party stalls. The campaign is being fought on radio and television and with the traditional leaflets posted through letterboxes.

And then there’s the weather. I woke the other morning to find the Pentland Hills, here in lowland Edinburgh, dusted in snow. Up north, there have been significant snow falls. There’s an arctic chill in the air. Maidens washing their faces in the dew on May Day morning and voters making their way to the polling stations on Thursday morning will have to be made of stern stuff.

There’s also the unexciting fact that the election is a foregone conclusion. The SNP are riding comfortably above 50 per cent in the opinion polls. Labour and the Conservatives are battling it out for a distant second place, both at around 20 per cent support. The Liberal Democrats and the Greens are vying for fourth place. And UKIP and the Socialists are hoping for some sort of divine intervention.

When it comes to the counting in the early hours of Friday

morning, the interest will be in the regional lists, the 56 seats allocated by proportional representation. Because the SNP are expected to win most of the 73 first-past-the-post constituency seats, it will be much harder for them to win yet more seats in the eight regions. So the other parties will be scrambling for a share of these regional seats and here we may see some interesting results.

There's little doubt then that Nicola Sturgeon will remain first minister on Friday morning and the SNP will form another majority administration. They have fought a faultless campaign, if a cautious one...no increase in income tax, no promise of another independence referendum. Labour, on the other hand, have gone for a 1p tax increase "to halt austerity". So too have the Liberal Democrats and the Greens which have allowed them to promise more spending on education and a shift towards a low-carbon economy.

Curiously, this is another of my reasons for thinking there will be low turnout. The issue of "tax versus spending" is a daunting one and it's the first time the Scottish parliament has been faced with the choice. This may make a lot of people think twice about which way to vote. And thinking twice doubles the chance that they will not vote at all.

This election too is taking place against a crowded background. There is the lurking issue of independence. There is the stumbling economy, still recovering from the Great Recession. It's just a year since an exhausting UK general election. And there is the looming referendum on our membership of the European Union. And that referendum itself is clouded by the immigration crisis hanging over the whole of Europe.

It's also been a fairly smooth campaign. There have been no major gaffs or unforeseen events.....so far. The party leaders have pulled off the usual round of stunts – in cake shops, farmyards, factories, children's nurseries, on bicycles,

bulldozers, boats and buffalos. They've endured two television debates, umpteen TV and radio interviews and a bizarre bombardment by the comedian Gary Tank Commander. I think they all deserve prizes and, no doubt, they will claim to have won.