

Letter from Scotland



The Kirk “remains.”

They call it “Scotland’s other Parliament”, the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. Well, it’s become the latest august institution to suggest we should vote to remain in the EU, in the referendum on 23 June.

There was much stamping of feet as the motion “recognising the increasing interdependence of nation states” was passed unanimously. But then, proving there is always room for doubters in the Kirk, its social care council also noted there were public concerns over the cost of membership, the free movement of people and the refugee crisis. “The EU is a work in progress,” said Rev Sally Foster-Fulton.

The 730 “commissioners”, drawn from congregations up and down the country, usually steer clear of politics these days – for fear of further schisms – but over the years the Assembly has been steadfastly in favour of the European Union. This happily reflects the majority opinion in Scotland – and in the new-fangled secular parliament at the other end of the Royal Mile.

This may explain why the referendum campaign in Scotland is not the Cromwellian affair it appears to be in England. In fact, much of the interest here centres on what happens if Britain votes to leave the EU but Scotland votes to stay in. The latest opinion poll suggests that 44 per cent of people would want a second independence referendum and another 8 per cent could be persuaded.

None of this stopped the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby mentioning both referendums in his speech to the Assembly – incidentally the first ever “sermon on the Mound” from an Archbishop of Canterbury. In what I thought was a pretty

courageous speech, he argued for solidarity among the nations abroad and solidarity with the poor at home. He was speaking during a debate on the Columba Declaration, the first formal co-operation agreement between the Church of England and the Church of Scotland since the Reformation.

The commissioners approved the Declaration unanimously, unlike their new friends in England, where there were 50 votes against. But the commissioners were in a mood to live dangerously this week. They passed motions insisting on the living wage, disinvesting in fossil fuels, against parents beating their children and in favour of accepting ministers in gay marriages.

Meanwhile, down at the lower parliament, Nicola Sturgeon was outlining her programme for government following the general election. Her two big themes were growing the economy and closing the attainment gap in education. She announced a national summit on school reform and a new high-powered committee of advisers on how Scottish education can be improved.

She tried not to be distracted – as the press were – by the family affairs inside the SNP. Her deputy leader Stewart Hosie MP announced he was resigning his party post after news broke of his affair with a lady journalist in London. To complicate matters, Mr Hosie's estranged wife happens to be Shona Robison, the health secretary and close friend of Ms Sturgeon. Scotland is indeed a village and we all know each other.

There was more controversy down at the village green on Saturday when Hibs were playing Rangers in the cup final at Hampden. It was a great match with five beautiful goals, the last one, at the last minute, came from the Hibs captain David Gray and sent the fans skyward. They were so excited, after waiting [114 years to win the cup](#), that they “forgot themselves” and invaded the pitch.

Unfortunately a hooligan element went on to torment and, in some cases allegedly assault Rangers players and staff and fight with Rangers fans. The pitch was also damaged and one of the goal posts broken. Fifteen arrests were made and it took a line of police, and horses, to drive the fans back into the stands.

This was clearly ungentlemanly behaviour and is the subject of an inquiry by the Scottish Football Association. Hibernian Football Club may have their silver cup but they are also awaiting the possibility of a substantial fine by the SFA.

Why do we Scots always have to spoil things at the last minute ?