

Letter from Scotland



Life is a marathon

The sound that will stay with me from this week is the gentle padding of 6,000 pairs of running shoes on the streets of Edinburgh. It was Sunday morning and I was watching the start of the 14th Edinburgh Marathon. I was impressed and humbled that so many people – of all shapes and sizes and ages and states of fitness – could dare to set out on a journey of 26 miles, knowing that they were supposed to run all that way and suffer like Greek soldiers in the mid-day sun.

The Kenyans came in first, of course. Boaz Kiprono was the first man back, in 2hr 20 minutes and Eddah Jepkosgei was the first woman in 2hrs 40minutes. But I wonder how the chap in the Batman costume got on, or the soldier with a full kit bag on this back, or the girl in gold, or the fireman complete with helmet and air tank, or the large man who'd run out of breath in the first 100metres. What we do know is that the runners in green shirts raised over £4m for Macmillan Cancer Support.

It must be one of the strangest phenomenon of our time that there are so many marathons being run these days. There are at least a dozen official marathons each year in Scotland alone, not to mention the half marathons, and 10k and 5k races. Some 30,000 runners took part in the various races that go under the banner of the Edinburgh Marathon Festival.

Maybe endurance has become a fashionable virtue again. We certainly need it in the political race towards the European referendum on 23rd June. Again this week most of the running has been made in England where the Remain and Leave campaigners are neck and neck, and increasingly at each

others' necks. Here, the campaign is subdued, with no window stickers, or street posters, or battle buses – only endless debates on radio and television.

We are still recovering, after all, from the Scottish parliamentary elections. On Thursday, we were treated to our first session of the new style First Minister's Questions. It was supposed to be more informative, less confrontational and more inclusive of lowly backbenchers. It was certainly longer – at 45 minutes – but otherwise it was much the same as before. This week, the main sparing point was a disturbing report-card on slipping standards in mathematics in our schools. All parties were to blame, of course, and again there was much talk of "closing the attainment gap."

Inevitably, the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was asked about the most disturbing story of the week, the lesbian couple convicted for the brutal murder of their two year old son Liam Fee and the horrific abuse they meted out to two other young boys in their care. Ms Sturgeon said she was "shocked and saddened" by the whole case and promised that lessons would be learned.

In the course of the trial, it emerged that the care authorities had been warned by a least three witnesses that all was not well in the household in Glenrothes run by Rachel and Nyomi Fee. The case has only added to the current controversy over the new system of "a named person" or official guardian being introduced this summer for every child in Scotland.

Regular readers may unfortunately remember that I predicted, just two weeks ago, that the first parliamentary rebellion against the new SNP government would be over the issue of sectarian songs at football matches. I was wrong. In fact it came this week over the issue of "fracking" for shale oil. Labour, Liberal Democrats and Greens ganged up to pass an amendment banning fracking in Scotland. The SNP were forced

to abstain in the vote because, they said, they were waiting for the results of a scientific report into the practice. Others suspect the party is divided over whether to end the current temporary moratorium on fracking.

It's a sign that this parliament is going to be more proactive than the last and will hold the SNP government more to account. It's altogether fitting and proper that they should do this. Nicola Sturgeon did not, after all, win a majority on May 5th. And I look forward to the next rebellion, though I'm not predicting what it will be about.

Finally, American readers may have over-looked the fact that their Republican presidential candidate is not American at all, but Scottish. His mother, Mary Ann MacLeod, was born on the Isle of Lewis, and the first words her son Donald heard were probably Gaelic. "The Donald" also has two important pieces of real estate here in Scotland. One is the much-revered Turnberry Golf Course on the Ayrshire coast, which this week re-opened to the public after a £200m revamp by Mr Trump. We must now call it Trump Turnberry.

Apparently the hotel has had a magnificent make-over and the each of the 18 holes on the Ailsa golf course has been redesigned by the renowned golf architect Martin Ebert. Most of the golfing commentators are heaping praise on the new course, saying it would be worthy of staging the Open Championship at the next available opportunity in 2022. Mr Trump himself is due to fly into Turnberry for the official re-opening ceremony on 24th June. By then we should know whether we are in Europe or out of it. Another marathon campaign will be over.