

Letter from Scotland



Above the clouds

We rose above the clouds and left the referendum and all other worldly issues behind. It was one of those extraordinary moments in the hills when you break through the mist and emerge into a magical landscape of white clouds beneath your feet and snow-etched mountains rearing up like Himalayan peaks all around. There was no wind, the air was warm and sky was a cheerful light blue.

This was last Saturday morning when a friend and I climbed one of Sir Hugh Munro's "Munros", Toll Creagach just north of Glen Affric. Of course, we met other hill walkers on the summits that day but not many, and some just ran on by, taking part in the Highlander Mountain Marathon. It was a day for all of us to escape to the hills and leave our cares behind.

Back on the ground however the fight over Britain's place in the European Union has become even more gruelling and vitriolic this week. The prime minister David Cameron accused the Leave campaigners of peddling six "complete untruths". The Leavers accused the Remainers of mounting "Project Fear".

Scotland stayed out of this unseemly battle until Thursday night when we sent our champion Nicola "Joan-of-Arc" Sturgeon into a TV debate against Boris "Bulldog" Johnson. In the line-up of three politicians from each side, it wasn't easy for Ms Sturgeon to deliver her usual karate chops but she did land a few blows on Boris, accusing him of being more interested in succeeding David Cameron as Prime Minister than in the future of Britain.

Ms Sturgeon had just come from a rather testing session of First Minister's Questions at Holyrood. She was assailed over

doctor shortages, a falling number of students going to university from poor backgrounds and, of course, the news this week that the new bridge over the Forth has fallen five months behind schedule.

The problem, the contractors say, has been the weather. Almost half of all working days in April and May were lost because of high winds and, over the winter, the number of days lost because of the weather was 15 per cent more than expected. However no one has been able to explain in laymen's terms how two months of bad weather adds up to five months of delay. And while delays usually mean budget overruns, apparently this is not going to be the case with this miraculous new bridge.

Perhaps the government's new Chief Scientific Advisor will be able to supply the answer. Professor Sheila Rowan, from Glasgow University's Institute for Gravitational Research, takes up this difficult post after the previous holder quit 18 months ago in a row over the government's ban on GM crops. (Which, by the way, was not taken on scientific grounds but on commercial grounds ie most of Europe has a ban on GM crops because consumers will not buy them.)

Professor Rowan will, no doubt, have to offer advice on such tricky subjects as fracking, the effects of alcohol, the zika virus, and any "scientific" emergency that may arise. The problem is that such issues are only partly to do with science. Luckily her job is also to patrol along this scientific border and encourage pupils and students to take up science as a career.

This will not be easy, especially among the girls. A Labour Party survey out this week found there's been a large drop in the number of girls studying science and computing in Scotland's schools. There was a 24 per cent drop in female students sitting Higher biology over the last ten years, a 32 per cent drop in chemistry, a 39 percent drop in physics and a

45 per cent drop in computer science.

Police Scotland is also trying to attract more women into its ranks, especially from the ethnic minorities. It's introducing the hijab into its uniform so that Muslim women will feel able to join. It will take the form of a scarf covering the head and neck but not the face. Ethnic minorities make up 4 per cent of the Scottish population but only 2.6 per cent of applicants to the police.

Another subject on which Professor Rowan may be asked for advice is energy supplies. How viable is tide or wave or solar power? This week the energy minister Paul Wheelhouse officially opened Scotland's largest solar farm at the Errol estate in Tayside. It covers 70 acres of land and can produce 13MW of electricity, enough to power 3,500 homes. It's a small beginning, but not bad for a cloudy country like ours.

More promising for Scotland, but further off, is a new attempt to produce energy from the tide. This week a small firm from Midlothian launched their prototype "Capricorn" marine turbine in the Firth of Forth. It's apparently much cheaper than previous machines and each one can generate enough electricity to power a thousand homes.

Another woman making the news this week was Leeann Dempster, the chief executive of Hibs Football Club. She has succeeded in bringing the former Celtic manager Neil Lennon to the club and she has set him the task of taking the team back into the Premier League next season.

So we've not been short of impressive ladies this week...Sturgeon, Rowan and Dempster. And, of course, this weekend is the celebration of the Queen's official birthday, her 90th. She may no longer be climbing many Munros but I hope she enjoys a blue-sky moment above the clouds of the referendum campaign.