

# Letter from Scotland



## Bridge over troubled waters

I've just come home from a cycling holiday in the North East where we came across Thomas Telford's remarkable little bridge over the River Spey at Craigellachie. It was built in 1814 and was revolutionary for its time because of its light delicate structure and slender archway. Yet it carried all traffic until the 1970s when a new concrete bridge was built a little further downstream, and it is still in service today for pedestrians and cyclists.

As the news from Westminster Bridge came rushing north to us this week, I couldn't help comparing the light and slender Theresa May to that bridge over the Spey. Can she really span the fast flowing divides between Britain and the European continent, between Scotland and England, between the bitter factions in her own party? And is she revolutionary enough to make it into the history books ? I doubt it.

They say she's a workaholic, which is not good sign. They say she was a strong Home Secretary but she failed to reduce immigration as promised. She was in favour of remaining in the EU yet she is now promising to make "Brexit mean Brexit." She says she's a revolutionary, wanting to make the economy work for the working class, but will she really tax the rich and create a more equal society ? I'm sure, like David Cameron, she is a capable and honest person and will try to fulfil her promises, but I just can't see her doing it.



In her Downing Street declaration, Mrs May said she was not so much a Conservative as a Unionist. But one Union she will find difficult to keep is the one with Scotland.



Nicola Sturgeon has answered the “Brexit means Brexit” slogan with her own “Remain means Remain.” She’s made it plain she intends to fulfil the wishes of the 62 per cent of Scots who voted to stay in the EU. Either that means a deal within a deal on Britain’s exit or it means a second referendum on Scottish independence. And she has set up a panel of experts, led by Professor Anton Muscatelli, to advise on how Scotland can keep its ties with Europe in the negotiations to come.

I don’t myself believe that Britain will leave the European Union. I think, in the end, we will find ourselves concluding that it’s all too complicated. Theresa May has been clever in appointing the merry band of Brexiteers – Boris Johnson, David Davis, and Liam Fox – to try to negotiate the exit terms. They are being sent on “mission impossible” and the whole unhappy episode will be washed away in the next general election.

Which brings us to the Labour Party. Oh how I wish there was a Scot in charge, a Keir Hardy, or Ramsay MacDonald, or even a Tony Blair or a Gordon Brown. What astonishes me about the whole stramash, is that it seems to be all about personalities rather than policies. Jeremy Corbyn’s critics simply say he’s not up to the job but they don’t say where they would take the party. And while Labour is distracted, the Tories are rushing the renewal of Trident through parliament before the holidays, hoping that no one will notice.

Meanwhile, here in Scotland, things are getting back to normal. We have a continuing dispute on the railways – more strike action this weekend. North Sea oil workers have voted for strike action over what they say is a 30 per cent cut in pay. Celtic lost another European tie, this time to the part-time players of Gibraltar. And Colin Montgomerie struck the first ball at the 145<sup>th</sup> Open Championship at Royal Troon.

Unfortunately his second shot went straight into a bunker.

Thank goodness for the happy normality the Queen seems to bring to everything. This week she's seen in her 13<sup>th</sup> prime minister in the usual way at Buckingham Palace.



This is after her "Scottish week" here at Holyrood Palace. She made sure she fitted in a visit to the horse racing at Musselburgh and on the way home, she and two companions, popped into the Sheep Heid Inn at Duddingston for supper.

The place has got used to celebrities over the years – Mary Queen of Scots, Bonnie Prince Charlie, Robert Burns, Robert Louis Stevenson, last year the American pop star Kelly Clarkson – but apparently the staff only got an hour's notice of the Queen's visit. Luckily there was a free table and a couple of lamb chops and a piece of fish in the fridge.

Oh, and the royal party also ordered a martini and a half bottle of white wine to drink to the week that was....extraordinary.