

Letter from Scotland



Good Night Edinburgh

It's the last weekend of the cultural invasion we call the Edinburgh Festival. The 3,500 shows are taking their last bow and the final firework display is about to light up the sky. But, still, the a-cappella groups, the single guitarists, the ball-spinners and the flyer fiends are out on the Royal Mile squeezing the last few ticket sales out of a slightly weary public. "Enough, no more, 'tis not so sweet as it was before," as a playwright from England once wrote on his twelfth night on the stage.

By all accounts this year's festival has been success. The final figures have not yet been totted up but the concerts, shows and events that I've been to have been packed out. The official festival began with a dramatic light-and-sound show projected onto the walls of Edinburgh castle. Entitled "Deep Time" it gave us an account of Scottish history from its geological beginnings. And after three weeks of everything from Shakespeare to Stand-up and Das Rheingold to Doris Day, it's ended with a racy version of Mozart's "Cosi fan Tutte," translated as "Thus do they all," which, of course, is totally untrue in Edinburgh.



Out in the real Scotland meanwhile, farmers are harvesting, school children are back at their desks, the economy is stuttering and the first minister Nicola Sturgeon is trying to balance the books, despite falling North Sea oil revenue.

This week we learned that the public finances are facing a £15bn black hole, with oil revenue down last year from £1.8bn to £60m. That amounts to a deficit of 9 per cent, compared to

the 4 per cent deficit for the UK as a whole. But so far that hasn't stopped both governments – Westminster and Holyrood – spending £1,200 more per head in Scotland than in the UK as a whole.



Nicola Sturgeon still insists we have a “fundamentally strong economy” but it's not being helped by the austerity budgets handed down from Westminster and the Brexit vote. She's produced figures showing that Scotland's national income will fall dramatically by 2030 if we leave the EU, by up to £11bn, and annual tax revenues could fall by £3.7bn. Hence her strong desire to keep Scotland in the EU, either through a special deal or through independence. And to this end she has brought in the SNP's old warhorse, Mike Russell, to lead the negotiations on the Scottish government's behalf.

Not to be confused with the Edinburgh Festival, Glasgow enjoyed a provincial tour on Thursday night from Labour's own Punch and Judy show. Jeremy Corbyn and Owen Smith slogged it out in front of Scottish Labour Party members, 23,000 of whom received ballot papers through the post this week for the leadership election.

Owen, an obscure MP from Wales, is asking party members to think again about their decision last year to elect Jeremy as UK Labour leader...for reasons that are not entirely clear to me. However, Mr Smith is quite good at making up policy on the hoof. The other day, for instance, he said that Labour members in Scotland should be free to campaign for independence. It's an interesting elaboration of his policy of granting the Scottish party “federal status.”

He also thinks British voters should be asked again if they are really serious about leaving the EU. Even if he doesn't win, this may push the Labour Party to vote against the formal Article 50 start of Brexit negotiations. And that, combined

with the SNP and pro-EU Tories, may see the UK government unable to even begin the process of leaving the EU. Should the will of parliament or the will of the people prevail ?

There are moves afoot to stage a belated welcome-home celebration for the 50 Scottish athletes who contributed to Britain's record medal haul at the Rio Olympics. Sport Scotland say they are busy making arrangements for such an event, to be staged at the new £33m, strangely named, "Oriam" sports centre on the Heriot Watt University campus. We are also caught up in a public debate over whether the athletes should be given national honours such as MBEs or even knighthoods.

I'm afraid no one deserves any honours for the grounding of the Transocean Winner oil rig on the beautiful west coast of Lewis. It broke free from its tow ropes in a storm two weeks ago and lodged at a precarious angle on rocks at Dalmore Bay. Since then recovery teams have been working to re-float the rig and prevent its oil tanks rupturing.

Finally, on the high tide on Monday night, the rig was towed free and taken to sheltered waters for repairs. It was actually a very colourful sight, with lights from the 17,000 tonne structure and the two tugs, sparkling against the dark Hebridean sky, a festival of light and sound to rival the fireworks a world away in Festival City.