

Letter from Scotland



Closing the gap

It won't be long now till the gaps in the new bridge over the Firth of Forth are closed. Last week I enjoyed a cruise on the river which took us under the 200 metre high concrete towers which will carry the 1.7 miles of motorway across the water between Fife and the Lothians. I have to admit it is a wonderful sight – even though I was against spending £1.3bn on this new highway to a high-carbon future. But whatever the rights and wrongs, we now have to bridge those gaps. And that's been the theme of the week for me.

The most shocking gap which was exposed this week is the poverty gap in a small part of Renfrewshire. The Ferguslie Park housing estate in Paisley has been branded the most deprived area of Scotland, while just eight miles away the Lower Whitecraigs area is the least deprived. This is according to the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation, a measure taken every four years of some 7,000 areas of Scotland, including income, housing, health, education, employment, crime and access to public services.

It's a measure of private affluence amid public squalor. And it's repeated in several other parts of Scotland, notably in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen where poor estates sit alongside wealthy suburbs. The idea behind collecting such uncomfortable figures is to help the government target public resources on those who need them most. But bridging the gap is not easy. Ferguslie Park, for instance, was bottom of the table four years ago and remains there, despite the efforts of the central government and the local council to target money, projects, development and advice on the area.

The beginning of the new school term was marked by much talk

of the “attainment gap” and this week Nicola Sturgeon and the education secretary John Swinney took their new international panel of experts to a primary school in East Lothian to begin their search for a method to close the gap between pupils from deprived backgrounds and the rest. The experts have come from all over the world – America, Canada, Scandinavia, Malaysia, even England – and we wait to see what they recommend. Will it be more teachers, better teachers, better head teachers, a better curriculum, better buildings, a more competitive system or a less competitive one ? Can the best pupils be stretched and the gap closed at the same time ?

Still more gaps have opened up in the political landscape this week. There’s a yawning chasm between the Westminster government, meeting around Mrs May’s dining room table at Chequers, and the European Union over the Brexit negotiations. Neither side really know what they are doing. The only words that came out of Chequers were that Britain would seek a “bespoke” deal with the EU and neither Scotland, nor Northern Ireland (who both voted to stay in the EU) would have a veto over it.

Meanwhile, the SNP and Labour in Scotland are trying to get on with business as usual. Nicola Sturgeon is re-launching the SNP’s independence campaign at a party event in Stirling this weekend. She says it will begin with a listening exercise but she’s already said that the Brexit vote makes a second referendum “very likely”.

The Labour leader Kezia Dugdale says she wants nothing to do with re-running referendums, either on Europe or Independence, and she’s been outlining her alternative programme for government. It begins with a “Fair Start Fund” for education, paid for by higher taxes on the rich. It goes on to include a bill to give trade unions more rights and a new law to require all care workers to be paid the “living wage.” Labour would also abolish the new law against singing sectarian songs at football matches.

None of this should frighten the horses, of course, because Labour has fewer MSPs in the Scottish Parliament than even the former “nasty party”, the Tories. The programme may however unite the Labour Party, or at least distract its attention from the civil war between the Corbynistas and the Smithites.

I was intrigued by the slight gap in expectations when a tourism company, National Holidays, advertised “a sensational adventure” sailing around the Hebrides. It turned out to be a return ticket on a Caledonian MacBrayne ferry between Oban and Mull, normally priced at £6.90. The advertisement spoke of majestic scenery, three castles, dolphins, minke whales and “a memorable island cruise.” It’s all true, of course, but the Advertising Standards Authority thought the advert was a little misleading and told the Hull-based company to be less poetic in its promotions.

I spent a windy hour on Arthur’s Seat on Monday evening watching the traditional fireworks that end the Edinburgh International Festival. Of course they were spectacular, they always are. And as the sparks faded, news came out that this year’s festival and fringe had been another box office success. Sales were up 10 percent for the official festival and nearly 8 per cent for the fringe. Not bad, for the show’s 70th year.

We need to be careful we don’t grow too big for our boots but as yet there is no sign of the “thundering hooves” of other international festivals closing the gap.