

Letter from Scotland



The green and the blue
dancing duo

Meet the “Shoes Brothers”, the dancing clergy for Ayrshire. Rev Neil Urqhart and Father Willie Boyd come from different sides of the religious divide in Scotland but they have joined forces to defeat sectarianism. In a series of zany videos, they have inspired football teams, groups of supporters, classes of school children, and anyone else who would watch and listen, to join in their dance routine and bridge the tribal gap between Catholicism and Presbyterianism which has plagued Scotland for 500 years.

They have just won the latest “Champions for Change Award” from the anti-sectarian campaign organisation “[Nil by Mouth](#)”. And it comes as the Scottish Parliament wrestles again with what to do about sectarianism. This week the opposition parties narrowly won a vote calling for the repeal of the Scottish Government’s Offensive Behaviour at Football Act. It was passed in the immediate aftermath of a particularly troublesome Rangers-Celtic game in 2011. Unfortunately it has not worked out well in practice.

The law forbids “offensive and threatening behaviour” specifically at football matches and includes a ban on singing sectarian songs. But which songs? And what constitutes “offensive” behaviour? One Sheriff, in Dundee, branded the new law “badly drafted” and “mince” and others have argued that sectarian behaviour can already be prosecuted under the existing law of “breach of the peace”. In 2014/15 there were only 79 convictions under the new law, less than one per cent of total “breach of the peace” convictions.

Football fans and opposition politicians say the SNP was

guilty of a knee-jerk reaction in 2011, grandstanding in order to be seen doing something about Scotland's "shame". The SNP argued that the law was sending out a clear message that sectarian behaviour is unacceptable.

But whatever happens over this particular law, we cannot get away from the fact that Scotland is still mired in religious prejudice. The Shoes Brothers say "Faith should not be something that divides people." But I'm afraid it still does. And I have personal reasons for sharing that "shame" – coming, as I do, from Northern Irish Presbyterian stock.

The Scottish Parliament was divided over yet another weighty matter this week – council tax. All political parties have been dancing around this issue for years, shying away from revaluing properties and increasing the tax in line with inflation to such an extent that it now only brings in only 18 per cent of what councils actually spend. For the last eight years it's been frozen by the SNP, with the connivance of the other parties. All are keen to argue in public that it's a bad tax but less willing to suggest a replacement. The SNP and the Liberal Democrats have flirted with the idea of a local income tax but that was quietly abandoned when it was realised that a tax on property is less easily avoidable and is actually a simple and useful way of raising public revenue.

So the SNP have come up with a plan to retain the council tax but change the rates to make the owners of higher-valued properties pay more, in some cases £500 a year more. The Tories, of course, don't like this tax on the rich, but the SNP hope to raise £100m which they say will be given to head-teachers in deprived areas to "close the attainment gap in schools." That, say the other opposition parties, is interfering with local councils who should be allowed to decide their own priorities. In the end, SNP members had to vote for an amended motion, criticising their own government, in order to get the tax changes through.

The city of Glasgow made dark history this week by becoming the first city in Britain to agree to open so-called “injecting rooms” for drug addicts. The idea is that NHS staff and social workers would be able to help drug addicts more easily and it would take addicts and their needles off the streets and underpasses. But critics say injecting rooms would only help addicts to manage their destructive habit rather than conquer it. I’m inclined to the view that drug addiction is an illness and these new-fangled injecting rooms are part of the cure.

I’m proud of the fact that the Scottish and English football teams are going to wear the poppy at their World Cup game at Wembley on Armistice Day, 11th November. I’m particularly glad they are standing up to Fifa, the governing body of world football, who have banned the wearing of poppy armbands on the grounds that they are a political statement. Not for the first time have Fifa misjudged the public mood. Wars are still with us. Soldiers are still dying. Only this week, a British soldier in training was killed in a tragic accident at a shooting range in the Highlands. He was named as Lance-Corporal Joe Spencer of 3rd Battalion, The Rifles which are stationed at Dreghorn Barracks in the capital.



Monarch of the Glen by
Landseer 1851

Finally, one of the iconic images of Scotland has been put up for sale. “Monarch of the Glen” by Sir Edwin Landseer captures Queen Victoria’s somewhat detached view of Scotland – wild, proud, all conquering.

How we have changed, and mostly for the better. The painting belongs to the whisky giant Diageo – having been acquired by John Dewar and Sons back in 1916.

For the past 20 years it's been on loan to National Museums Scotland.

National Galleries of Scotland explained their position to The Edinburgh Reporter : "National Galleries of Scotland always carefully considers any paintings with a strong Scottish dimension that come on to the market but for obvious reasons we never comment on our potential interest ahead of a sale."

We're told it's worth some £10m, a lot to pay for a bygone image. But then Scotland does value its past, perhaps too much. I wonder which painting captures the modern Scotland ?

Photo of the Clergymen by kind permission of [Nil By Mouth](#)