

Letter from Scotland



Remembering fallen leaves

Remembrance weekend is always captured for me by golden leaves on green grass. The leaves are lives which are blown down by the cold wind of winter and the grass is the life those soldiers could have had. And that we might have in the future...if....

It's a time when I feel the shame of letting those soldiers down. They died to end all war and yet we have three major wars going on this weekend – in Syria, Iraq and Afghanistan – and over a dozen “minor” wars in various parts of the world.

Here in Scotland it's been a week of commemoration events and also a series of “defence” [announcements](#) from the UK government. The famous Fort George barracks near Inverness is to close, after 250 years. Another seven sites are to be phased out, including Redford barracks in Edinburgh and Glencorse barracks at Penicuik. It's all part of a defence review which will see 56 military sites across the UK closed over the next 25 years.

The defence secretary Sir Michael Fallon said all the savings would be reinvested in “better” facilities and the number of military personnel in Scotland will actually increase. He also confirmed that work on the Royal Navy's eight new frigates will begin next summer at the BAE Systems shipyard on the Clyde.

Where the world of war and peace will be when all these “investments” are complete will be decided, disturbingly, by two loose cannons...Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. Putin seems bent on supporting any wicked regime that the West doesn't like and Trump says he doesn't want to get involved in any foreign wars....except the current one in Iraq, where he

says he will bomb the Islamic State out of existence.

We know Donald here in Scotland as the wayward son of a nice old lady from the Western Isles. He's invested in two local golf courses in her honour, trampling on a few feet and some rare grasses as he did so. I guess he will now have to place these pieces of real estate into some sort of "trust" now that he is to be President and can no longer use them to avoid tax.

Donald will be further disappointed to hear that Scotland is gradually moving towards a total ban on "fracking". We actually believe that climate change is happening. This week the Scottish Government published six studies into various aspects of fracking – economic, environmental, health etc – most of which were negative. There will be one more public consultation exercise but it looks very likely that parliament will make the current moratorium on fracking permanent when it votes on the issue next year.

At First Minister's Questions on Thursday, Ruth Davidson, the Conservative leader, asked Nicola Sturgeon about her mysterious "China Deal". This was a memorandum of understanding signed in April between two large Chinese state-run companies and the Scottish Government looking forward to investments in infrastructure projects in Scotland. They were said to be worth up to £10bn but were never spelt out. In fact, we only learnt about the deal when a photograph of the signing appeared in an obscure Chinese trade paper.

When the story emerged, and inquiries were made into the two Chinese companies involved, it appeared that they were less than careful about the legality of their dealings and had a dubious human rights record. Several countries had withdrawn from similar deals. There was an outcry here and this week the newspapers discovered that some of the Scottish firms involved in the Chinese discussions had pulled out. Ms Davidson said it was all a dreadful embarrassment for the government and not exactly a fine example of transparency. Ms

Sturgeon replied that she was doing her best to attract foreign investment into Scotland. (And slung a bit of mud about Nissan and the UK Government and the lack of transparency there while she was at it. Ed.)

Just when we needed something inspiring to take our minds off our problems, Andy Murray came up with a few good shots. Last weekend, he won the Paris Masters and took over from Novak Djokovic as the Number One tennis player in the world. "I'll keep working hard to get better," was all he had to say. No triumphalism there then.

Nor will there be at Wembley this evening I suspect, even if Scotland wins against England in the World Cup qualifiers. We'll just keep working hard to get better. But both football teams will be wearing the commemorative poppy, defying Fifa rules and declaring that, at work or play, on the political stage or off it, on the 11th of November of all days, we cannot forget that "the only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing."

