

Letter from Scotland



Nicola Sturgeon's visit to Dublin this week was one of those symbolic pilgrimages politicians need to make from time to time to make a political point. It was certainly an away-win for her, though here in Scotland it was more of a home-draw.

She went with the intention of harnessing the Irish Republic's enthusiasm for the European Union to boost her campaign to keep Scotland in the Single Market. The Irish Government couldn't promise anything but she was given a right republican welcome anyway and had the rare privilege of addressing the Irish Senate.

Irish eyes were smiling every time she mentioned the word "independence" and, of course, there was much tut-tutting about the English and the Welsh voting to leave the EU. The Dubliners also agreed with Ms Sturgeon about Westminster's political short-sightedness. London had forgotten all about the effect Brexit might have on the Northern Ireland peace process and on trade between the North and the South.

Having spent the first eleven years of my life in Dublin, I have long pondered the relationship between Ireland and Scotland. Are we basically one culture? (Yes). Are we so very different from the English? (No). Should we all have been given Home Rule in Gladstone's time? (Yes) And would that have avoided the civil war and the "troubles" in Ireland and the quest for independence in Scotland? (Yes). I read

the history of the British Isles not as a story of English colonialism but as class warfare between the rich and the poor.

But now as we confront the European question, I think the Sturgeon analysis is right and that the Scots and the Irish will be drawn together in the struggle to keep the European dream alive. The challenge is that no one quite knows whether a “soft Brexit” (Britain remaining in the Single Market) will be possible or not. And no one knows whether Ms Sturgeon’s plan B (another independence referendum) will ever happen either. The latest opinion poll, for instance, suggests that support for independence has fallen to 44 per cent.

Into all this uncertainty strolled the Chancellor, Philip Hammond, on a short visit to Scotland. He added to the uncertainty by saying it was unlikely that Scotland could remain in the Single Market if the rest of the UK left. But, on the other hand, he would be listening to the Scottish Government’s plan to make this happen.

He was also here to see how his Autumn Statement was going down in our neck of the woods. Like a shot pigeon, was the answer. Nicola Sturgeon complained that the Scottish Government was having its grant cut by 9 per cent over next five years. Local councils are complaining that they will be £533m short by 2019. The IPPR think tank brought out a report this week which claims that the Chancellor’s cap on welfare benefits will cost the poor in Scotland £550m a year.

The IPPR calculated that income tax in Scotland would have to rise by 3 pence in the pound to make up the shortfall of £1.3bn in public spending by 2020. Of course, the Scottish parliament could do this, under powers which were devolved to it this week. But only the bravest Bravehearts are suggesting this. Labour and the Liberal Democrats come nearest, with a 1 pence rise proposed in their election manifestos last spring.

Even the banks are experiencing hard times. They have been undergoing “stress tests” by the Bank of England, worried about the negative effects of Brexit. The Royal Bank of Scotland came out of the tests worst of all the big banks and it’s been ordered to put aside another £2bn for contingencies.

The latest crime figures were published this week. They show another fall in the overall number of reported crimes. But violent crime is increasing, with assaults up 9 per cent in the six months to October, knife crime up 7 per cent and sexual assaults up 11 per cent. The police say they are coming under more pressure in other areas of their work – missing persons, domestic abuse cases, antisocial behaviour and traffic offences. And this week they started work on a whole new round of historic child abuse cases in sport, following allegations made against some football coaches in England.

It’s been astonishingly mild this week. But the Scottish Avalanche Information Service has chosen to remind us that winter has not been abolished. It says 109 climbers were caught up in avalanches in the last year. Most had lucky escapes but three people died in a single 10-day period last February. So the usual winter warning is being issued again.

And another reminder of winter is the Christmas lights now shining brightly in all our city centres, Stirling finally joining in this weekend. And the shops...well they’ve had the tinsel on display for weeks.

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