

Letter from Scotland



Schools receive a
warning

Oh dear what can the matter be, our schools have been marked down by the OECD. This is the international outfit which carries out a study of some 70 education systems across the globe every few years. This year the so-called Pisa study found that Scotland's 15 year-old pupils had slipped down the international table to be just "average" in English, maths and science. We are now way behind swotty countries like Singapore, China, Estonia, Poland, Ireland, even England.

I find myself in denial. Can we really have thrown away our reputation for a fine education system stretching back to the Reformation? Are the comparisons fair? Or is the OECD pitting elite schools in the likes of Singapore and China against "bog standard" comprehensives in Scotland? Whatever the truth of the matter, the Education Secretary John Swinney is taking the results seriously, saying they make "uncomfortable reading" and are "unacceptable." They do after all show an absolutely drop in Scotland's standards since the last survey in 2012.

He puts the results down to teething problems with the new Curriculum for Excellence and he has a five point plan for doing something about it, particularly cutting back the bureaucracy and giving more power to head teachers. I put the results down to the fact that there are 4,000 fewer teachers in our schools than there were ten years ago, not to mention other cuts in education budgets due to the Westminster government's austerity programme. I also wonder whether our young people's addiction to mobile phones and computer games has got anything to do with it.

In parliament, the SNP were being accused of “taking their eye off the ball” in education because of their “obsession” with independence. The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said it was Westminster who was obsessed with constitutional change, as this week’s hearing on Brexit in the Supreme Court showed. Scotland’s Lord Advocate James Wolffe QC, argued that the Scottish parliament had to be consulted before the EU exit process was triggered. The whole hearing had the air of a medieval trial with Theresa May’s government in the dock.

The Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale wandered into this constitutional debate with a speech calling for a post-Brexit convention to determine the powers of the various parliaments in Britain. She even mentioned the word “federalism”. Her plan is to be put to the Labour Party conference in February.

The football abuse scandal has now spread from England into Scotland, to our shame. The Scottish Football Association was forced to apologise after it emerged that it had failed to take action after a 50 year-old man came forward to claim he’d been repeatedly abused by a coach and assistant referee back in the 1980s. Labour has called for the current abuse inquiry to be widened to cover sports clubs as well as residential homes. But the government says that would make the inquiry too unwieldy and lead to years of delay.

The announcement that Prestwick Airport has signed a deal with a firm in Houston, Texas, to become Britain’s first “spaceport” has the whiff of an April Fool’s joke. But, apparently, the Prestwick executives believe the first aeroplanes could take off for a journey into space by 2019. It will begin with zero-gravity flights for medical research but eventually passengers could be carried. Well, no doubt people laughed at the Wright brothers in 1903.

Finally, let me salute Donnie Campbell from Skye. He has just set a new record for completing the “Ramsay Round” of 24 mountains around Ben Nevis in less than 24 hours. His time

was 23 hours 6 minutes. And this in the middle of winter. "It's the hardest thing I've ever done in my life," he said as he collapsed into his hotel room afterwards. And this from a 32 year-old former Royal Marine who has been fell-running all over the world, from the Namib Desert to Mont-Blanc.

Our education standards might be slipping but our mountain-running is the best the world.