

Letter from Scotland



The road not taken

When the American poet Robert Frost came to a junction in a path through the woods, he “took the one less travelled by, and that made all the difference.” At the beginning of a new year, I get that same feeling, that we are taking the road less travelled by. It certainly feels pretty quiet.

The Hogmanay visitors have gone home. The schools and universities have not yet re-opened. No one has any money left to go shopping. There is a slow and reluctant drift back to work.

The only thing to talk about is the weather. It has been surprisingly cheerful, lots of low sunshine, clear blue skies, no rain that I can remember. But it has been cold. And we were reminded that it really is winter when the first news story of the year was about a couple who got lost in a deep snow and a white-out on Cairngorm mountain. I have been in such conditions on Cairngorm and I can understand what they went through.

Luckily they were well equipped and had a survival bag with them. They spent the night huddled together on the windswept plateau and were found by rescue teams the next morning. Just a day or two later, a hill walker was overcome with exhaustion on his way back down Ben Macdui. Again, he was lucky. A couple of younger mountaineers happened to be passing and half-carried him 3k, until they found a phone signal and could call out the mountain rescue team. The team leader said the young couple had been “heroes”...but then so are the rescue teams themselves.

The other story which has been dominating the news here is a

mysterious house fire which killed a young man in the well-to-do village of Milngavie (pronounced Mulguy) north of Glasgow. His girlfriend was rescued from the house by the young man's father but she is in a critical condition in hospital. The fire broke out at 7.30am on New Year's Day and the police say it was caused deliberately. They are thus treating it as a case of murder. But they are not saying who the target was, what possible motive there might have been or whether they have any leads or suspects.

It wasn't the only murder over the New Year period. There was one in Kirkcaldy, another in Bonnyrigg and in Edinburgh a former footballer for Bonnyrigg Rose Football Club was killed outside a pub in the early hours of New Year's Day. Two teenagers were charged with his murder.

I hesitate to disturb you with political news so early in the year but at least it is not about death. Unless you count a warning from the Blairite Fabian Society that the Labour Party is about to fall even further down the opinion polls. It brought out a report which said Labour was heading for just 20 per cent of the vote in the next election, down to 150 MPs. The only way Labour could oust the Tories was to form a "progressive alliance" with the Liberal Democrats and the SNP. The suggestion has been laughed at in Scotland by both Labour and the SNP. The Labour leader Kezia Dugdale said simply that "the SNP is not a progressive party."

Indeed, Labour has used the quiet days of New Year to issue press releases attacking the SNP for allowing long delays in court cases because of their policy of closing down several local sheriff courts. It's also obtained figures which show that "bed blocking" in the NHS is still a major problem, a year after the SNP said it was phasing it out. Labour said at least 680 patients – who could have been discharged – died in Scottish hospitals in the 18 months to September last year. They just had nowhere else to go because of a shortage of places in nursing homes or care packages at home.

Finally, as we dispose of our Christmas trees – recycling them, of course – we can rest easy in the knowledge that they are five times as environmentally friendly as artificial trees. The figure comes from the Scottish Parliament's information centre which was asked to look into the matter by the environment committee.

Apparently when you add everything up – raw materials, transport, carbon dioxide produced and consumed etc, natural Christmas trees have a much lighter carbon footprint than their artificial cousins. They have other advantages – they create more employment here at home, they smell better and they give endless hours of enjoyment picking the needles out of your carpet for the rest of the year.