

Letter from Scotland



A cool start to the year for the Scouts

While the rest of the world was worrying about Mr Trump's wall or what the Appeal Court judges would say about Brexit, I was shivering in a tent at a Scout camp on the edge of the Pentland Hills. This crazy venture is known as the "Brass Monkey Camp", held every winter, in an attempt to offer Scouts – boys and girls – a real challenge. And it certainly was "challenging" to get up at 7am, after a fitful night's sleep, and pack your tent away in freezing cold fog, all before breakfast.

But 80 or so brave 11-14 year olds survived the adventure – and all its other challenges – and went home rejoicing. The tents took days to dry out and the leaders are still defrosting.

Those 80 youngsters looked healthy enough, but apparently Scotland is still the sick child of Europe, according to a report this week from the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health. It found that although child health is improving in Scotland, it is improving at a much slower rate than most of Western Europe.

Some 27 per cent of children are overweight or obese and 400 children die each year from avoidable diseases. The basic issue, the report says, is inequality. A fifth of all children in Scotland, 210,000, live in households below the poverty line. They do not have a good start in life. Nearly a third of mothers in deprived areas smoke during pregnancy, only 15 per cent of them breast-feed. Children living in poverty do not enjoy a good diet, nor do they take the right amount of exercise. And despite all the government's programmes to address these issues, Scotland – indeed the

whole UK – is slipping behind its European neighbours.

The answer of course is to do something about poverty, relative poverty, which brings us to the state of our public services and the Budget. MSPs this week voted down the SNP government's first attempt at drafting next year's Budget. Ministers now need to reach an agreement with one of the other parties to get their tax and spending plans through parliament. Labour, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats want to see Scotland's new power to raise income tax actually used to fund better public services. The SNP may well be forced into doing so, or face an election.

The historic ruling by the Appeal Court in London on Tuesday, that the Westminster parliament must approve the triggering of Brexit negotiations, has received a mixed response in Scotland. On the one hand, Remainers (62 per cent of Scottish voters) have welcomed the fact that we are stilling living in a parliamentary democracy and sovereignty lies with MPs in the House of Commons, not with the Prime Minister nor the People, even in a referendum. But on the other hand, MSPs at Holyrood are disappointed that the judges ruled against them having any legal say over negotiations with Europe. The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon says it all makes a second independence referendum even more likely.

None of this has stopped the Scottish Government pressing on with its de-carbonising agenda. This week it published a new target to generate half of all Scotland's energy requirement (heating as well as electricity) from renewable sources by 2030. It's a big ask, since only 15 per cent of our energy comes from renewables at present.

It would take our greenhouse gas reduction to 66 per cent. The current target, a 42 per cent reduction by 2020, has already been met, so there is hope. The plan includes another attempt at carbon capture, reducing energy demand, greater energy efficiency and district heating. If Mr Trump is

listening, Scotland, at least, is taking the “Chinese hoax” over climate change seriously.

A strange row is continuing to rumble over the goings-on at St Mary’s Episcopal Cathedral in Glasgow. It held an interfaith service recently involving a reading from the Koran. Unfortunately the Muslim student concerned chose a passage which specifically states that Jesus is not the son of God. This has caused some Christians to raise an eyebrow and others to raise merry hell.

The head of the Episcopal church in Scotland, Bishop David Chillingworth, has been forced to apologise, and now one of the Queen’s chaplains Rev Dr Gavin Ashenden has resigned his official role so that he can speak out against such readings from the Koran. So much for the Cathedral’s attempt at inter-faith dialogue. Oh well, the best laid schemes.....

And while we are still in Burns season, let us sing in praise of two Glasgow lassies who look set for classical music stardom.

Sisters Sarah and Laura Ayoub have been signed up by Decca Records. They’ve already played violin and cello at the Royal Albert Hall and recorded at the Abbey Road studios. The Royal Scottish National Orchestra was brought in to accompany them in a medley of Scottish songs. And now, for Burns Night, they have made a recording of “My love is like a red, red rose” and other Burns classics which should keep us calm and romantic though the rest of the winter.

Here is a little snippet for you:

Our brand new single is out NOW! Our favourite Scots tunes with the [@RSNO](#). Available now on iTunes: <https://t.co/SXwHsdD46G> pic.twitter.com/483bHHD6H2

– The Ayoub Sisters (@TheAyoubSisters) [January 20, 2017](#)