

Letter from Scotland



You're fired!

I'm proud of my fellow Scots this week. While we were busy debating our national budget, thousands of people found time to turn out on street demonstrations against Donald Trump's latest outrage...the arbitrary ban on some Muslims and refugees entering the United States. And tens of thousands signed an on-line petition calling for his state visit to Britain to be cancelled.

Monday was not a particularly nice night, cold and damp, but there were protest [marches in Edinburgh](#), Glasgow, Aberdeen and Dundee organised by "Stand up to Racism Scotland". We are not in the front line of this battle, and the ban is largely symbolic (since it only lasts 90 days and only affects people from seven Muslim countries) but the immediate public anger against even a whiff of Trumpism was uplifting.

Throwback to last night's anti-Trump march along Princes Street [#ScotlandAgainstTrump pic.twitter.com/FENnAv90yD](#)

– Edinburgh Reporter (@EdinReporter) [January 31, 2017](#)

But down to the budget. The minority SNP government managed to squeeze its £30bn budget through parliament with the help of the 6 Green MSPs, thus avoiding a general election. The Conservatives voted against, because the budget taxes the rich too much. Labour and the Liberal Democrats voted against, because it taxes the rich too little.



Derek Mackay, Cabinet Secretary for Finance and the Constitution appears before the Finance and Constitution Committee to give

evidence on the expenditure proposals in the Scottish Government's Draft Budget 2017-18. During this session Derek Mackay also answered questions from the public via Twitter. 16 January 2017. Pic – Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

This year's budget was the first under the new devolution settlement which allows income tax rates and bands to be raised or lowered in Scotland. The SNP have chosen to keep the rates as they are but have not followed the Conservative government's policy in England and Wales of lowering the threshold for the 40 per cent band. The Greens wanted to introduce a new 60 per cent band for top earners but were willing to accept a compromise which will mean anyone in Scotland earning over £43,000 a year will pay up to £400 a year more in income tax than people in England and Wales.

The funding of local councils was the key issue in the budget debate, with the opposition parties saying council budgets were being cut by £327m but the government insisting that they are being given an extra £240m when special programmes are taken into account, such as £120m for school head teachers, and diverted NHS money for care in the community. The Greens managed to get the core funding for councils increased by £160m which they say will go some way to reversing the SNP's tendency to centralise public services.

That £120m for head teachers, by the way, is being handed out according to the number of children from deprived backgrounds attending each school. It will allow the school to decide how to close the so-called "attainment gap", with for example, more teachers, or more home-work clubs or better technology etc.

Back to international affairs, and the people on the streets have not been left to do all the heavy lifting. MPs too have been fighting the good fight to keep Britain in the European

Union – as 62 per cent of Scots wanted in last year's referendum.

[All of Scotland's 59 MPs](#) – bar one, the only Conservative, David Mundell – voted against the triggering of Brexit negotiations in the House of Commons on Wednesday night. And the first minister Nicola Sturgeon was in Cardiff on Monday to join with the leaders of the other devolved administrations to urge the prime minister to consider a “soft Brexit”, keeping Britain in the single market and the customs union.

It appears they got nowhere and that led Ms Sturgeon to declare that time was running out on a compromise and Scotland was closer than ever to independence. The trouble is that the latest opinion polls show there is still no majority in Scotland for independence and only 27 per cent of Scots want a second referendum any time soon.

Shetland, of course, is just about independent already, or at least sees itself as half Scandinavian. On Tuesday night the Vikings paraded through Lerwick in the traditional “Up Helly Ah” ceremony and burnt their boats with the rest of Britain. The sight of the 58-strong jarl squad with their glistening helmets, axes, shields and flaming torches certainly makes me wonder which country I'm living in and which century.

The University of Reading was telling us this week that the Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights, are retreating north at an alarming rate. Apparently we won't be able to see the “lights”, even in Shetland, in 50 years' time because of changes in the Sun's activity and the magnetic field of the Earth. I've only seen the lights once, at a scout camp in Aberdeenshire, and they are a magical sight, a reminder that we live in a universe not just a planet.

All is not what it seems either on the ground. To our embarrassment we've discovered that the “Great Scottish Run”, supposedly a half marathon, is not 13.1 miles long after all.

The course last October in Glasgow was 150m short and the 32,000 runners have all been given false times.

A few puzzled folk at the time wondered why they had suddenly improved their personal bests and the organisers were eventually persuaded to measure the course again. It turns out that they had made changes at the last minute because of road works and the new distances had not been properly measured. No refunds are being offered but runners are being guaranteed entry for next year's "Even Greater Scottish Run."

Photo of President Donald J Trump by The White House, via Wikimedia Commons