

Letter from Scotland



Macbeth and the witches (Romney 1785)

It's always surprising to see your own country from afar. A few days ago I found myself in a village hall in the hedge-rowed depths of Hertfordshire watching a production of Shakespeare's "Scottish Play." Is this how the English still see Scotland, I wondered, a land of moors and castles and witches and rival gangs of wild-eyed Highlandmen ?

Certainly the producer was in apocalyptic mood. He set the play in the year 2026. The European Union and NATO had disintegrated. Putin's Russia had overrun much of Europe. Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland had broken away from the UK and, like England itself, were ruled by tyrannical kings who played one warlord against another. The actors were dressed in camouflaged battle-dress and 2nd World War footage was projected onto the walls of Macbeth's castle. On my seat in the theatre was a leaflet inviting me to join The Resistance and restore the rule of law, signed by "General Nicolas (sic) Sturgeon."

So do the English see Nicola Sturgeon as a Joan of Arc figure leading us into a new promised land of free university education, free personal care, free prescriptions, a better performing NHS, lower council tax rises and a political system free from right wing ideology and xenophobia ? Well they certainly see her as a feisty young woman fighting for her country.

This week they have seen her get her budget through the Scottish Parliament, with just a few tweaks to satisfy the Greens. They've seen her raise more income tax from those earning over £43,000 a year...the first time the rich will pay more in tax in Scotland than they do in England (up to £400 a

year more). They've seen the Scottish Government head off a business tax revolt by capping annual increases at 12.5 per cent. And they've seen Scotland getting its own BBC television channel (in the autumn of next year).

Shakespeare's three witches have certainly been conjuring up a storm. Storm Doris, the fourth of the winter, swept in from the west on Thursday with rain, sleet, snow and high winds. It caused long delays on the roads and railways. Perthshire and Central Scotland seemed to be the worst affected, with a number of schools being closed and power lines brought down.

The witches have also have been warning Jeremy Corbyn and the Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale that there's going to be "hubble, bubble toil and trouble" at this weekend's Scottish Labour conference in Perth. It follows the party's shock defeat in the Copeland by-election. The party in Scotland is almost as badly split over the Corbyn leadership as it is in England and Wales and is trying hard to find a new and inspiring message for the electorate, with just weeks to go before another round of local council elections.



In an uneasy flashback to earlier times, archaeologists are beginning a search, not far from the conference centre in Perth, for the remains of James 1st who was brutally stabbed to death by his so-called noblemen in 1437. An exhibition is being mounted in the local museum this weekend to explain the project to the public and to any of the Labour party delegates who care to take lessons from the past.

It's thought poor James tried to flee his noble friends by climbing through a sewer but found that it had been blocked up by the local tennis club because they were tired of seeing their tennis balls disappearing down into it. The death of James 1st led to the abandonment of his grand plan for Perth

being the capital of Scotland. It clung on to its status as a city until 2003 when the then Labour government demoted it to a town. Since then the three witches have cast a spell on Labour and in 2012, the SNP government quickly decided to restore Perth's city status.

Shakespeare's tale of treachery, guilt and the dangers of predicting the future still has the power to frighten us today.