

Letter from Scotland

✘ This week we launched the UK's biggest ever warship, the 65,000 tonne aircraft carrier HMS Queen Elizabeth. It slid gently out of its dock at Rosyth and squeezed under the new Forth Bridge...another recent icon of Scottish engineering. But I wonder if these prestige projects are worth it ?

The Queen Elizabeth cost £3bn, the equivalent of four major hospitals or 100 new schools. Yes it will employ 700 crew and has given work to six UK shipyards – including BA Systems on the Clyde. But the hospitals or schools would create even more jobs. Yes the ship will be an ambassador and defender of our values throughout the world. But our NHS and educational establishments also set an example and champion our values. And there are other less expensive ways of defending our shores.

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Take the new Queensferry Crossing, to give the new bridge its proper name: it cost £1.3bn and has been built because the existing road bridge is carrying twice as much traffic than it was designed for. Yet if heavy vehicles were banned from the existing bridge – and made to go via Stirling – it would last another 60 years.

But somehow we get carried away with these exciting projects. It's hard not to be proud of the greatest ship on the Forth since James IV's Great Michael. And as for the new bridge, it opens at the end of August and tickets for the walk-the-new-bridge days, 2 and 3 September 2017, have been over-subscribed four times. Great engineering reminds us of our glorious past when Scotland was the laboratory and workshop of the Empire.

But actually, engineering today is not the driver of the

economy – whatever the politicians' photo opportunities would have us believe . It's only 7 per cent of our economy, in the value of its output, and it's been in recession for the past four years, only improving slightly this year. Instead, the biggest source of our national wealth is the service sector ...education, health, transport, finance, tourism etc. Consumer spending is crucial to this sector and, unfortunately, that has been falling due to falling real wages and a lack of confidence in the future.

The experts at the Fraser of Allander Institute have been telling us this week that the Scottish economy is in danger of tipping back into recession and is certainly going to lag behind the rest of the UK. It predicts that growth will hover around 1.5 per cent over the next two years. Earlier in the week, we had the Joseph Rowntree Foundation warning that a million Scots are still living below the poverty line and one in five employees are being paid less than the living wage.

The opposition parties are laying at least part of the blame on the uncertainty caused by the SNP's quest for a second referendum on Scottish independence. And they've welcomed Nicola Sturgeon's announcement this week that she will not be introducing legislation for a second referendum until 2019 when the outcome of the Brexit negotiations should be known. It means that any possibility of a referendum has been postponed till 2020. The climb-down follows a period of "reflection" after the SNP lost a third of its vote in the general election last month.

But that hasn't stopped Ms Sturgeon continuing to demand a place for Scotland at the Brexit negotiations. Or complaining that Scotland is losing out on £3bn of funding, compared with the deal offered by Theresa May to Northern Ireland in exchange for the Democratic Unionist Party's support at Westminster.

The SNP this week have been mourning the loss of one of its

founding fathers, Gordon Wilson, who has died at the age of 79. He was the man who invented the slogan "It's Scotland's oil" and led the party's electoral surge in the 1970s. He was MP for Dundee East for 13 years. As party leader he found himself forced to expel the left-wing "79 Group" which included Alex Salmond, Margo MacDonald and Kenny MacAskill but he also led the great reconciliation which eventually saw Alex Salmond succeed him as leader in 1990. He remained politically active and played a prominent role in the independence referendum in 2014.



Greenpeace's "Beluga II" at Ben Nevis. Photo
by Will Rose

Finally, a ship just an eighth of the size of HMS Queen Elizabeth and costing 3,000 times less, sailed back into the Firth of Forth this week after a voyage round Scotland. The Greenpeace ship the Beluga II has spent the last two months collecting plastic rubbish from our beaches and inshore waters to highlight the damage we are doing to our oceans and wildlife. It's conducted 40 "scientific trawls" and samples are being sent to Exeter University for detailed analysis.

But meanwhile, Greenpeace has launched a public petition calling on the Scottish government to introduce a plastic bottle return scheme to cut down the pollution of our seas and shoreline. Greenpeace estimates that across the world, a truck load of plastic is being dumped into the sea every minute. In so many ways, we humans need to behave better.