

Letter from Scotland



Is it art or engineering ?

Isn't she beautiful ? Our new bridge over the Forth has won me over with her sheer elegance and white-cabled grace. I have to admit I was against the whole Queensferry Crossing project when it first began in 2007. I thought we should repair the existing bridge and send all the heavy lorries round by Stirling. It was they, after all, which had pulverised it far beyond its designed capacity. We could have spent the £1.3bn on new schools or playing fields or paying off our PFI debts.

But maybe I should just get used to our high-carbon modern world where we just accept we have to dash about in motor cars and all our supplies have to be carried around the country on diesel guzzling pantechinons. Climate change just isn't happening. This is a week for celebration not criticism.

We can be proud of our new bridge, a national symbol of excellence. The three concrete towers stand over 200 meters high. They support a dual carriageway 1.7 miles long on 288 criss-crossing cables, each of which can be replaced separately without having to close the bridge to traffic (the big problem with the old bridge). The 122 deck sections (made in China) had to be gently hoisted into place from barges on the river. New approach roads had to be constructed. All this work, involving 15,000 people, had to be undertaken in pretty challenging weather conditions. It was done within budget and only eight months late.

So excited were we by this achievement, that 100,000 drivers piled onto the bridge on its first day, Wednesday, causing the very traffic jams the bridge was designed to avoid. In normal times, it's expected to carry 80,000 vehicles a day – buses, taxis and bicycles will use the old bridge. This weekend the

Queensferry Crossing will close to traffic and 50,000 lucky ticket holders will be allowed to walk across it before the Queen officially opens it on Monday, 53 years to the day since she opened the old bridge.

Can we measure our progress as a civilisation by the bridges we build ? The Victorian railway bridge, which opened in 1890, was the first and most stunning achievement, replacing a centuries-old ferry crossing. Then came the suspension bridge, when we had no doubt about the success of the motor car and Britain's manufacturing future. And now, we've built an even bigger bridge, for a post-industrial age, and just as the government has announced the phasing out of the petrol car and the beginning of the new era of electric transport.



Kezia Dugdale

So much for the diaried event of the week. What was not on agenda was the surprise resignation of the Scottish Labour Party leader, Kezia Dugdale. She decided to "pass on the baton" for personal reasons after just two years in the job. But those two years have been unusually hectic – two referendums, three elections and the Labour party, all the while, in defeat and turmoil. Her own personal life has not been easy either – a breakdown of one relationship, the early death of her good friend Gordon Aikman and the start of a new relationship with Jenny Gilruth an SNP MSP.

Her big achievement has been to hold the Scottish Labour Party together over such a turbulent period. Although it fell to third place in the Scottish elections and lost ground in the local elections, it increased its MPs from one to seven in the June UK general election. Whether that was due to the Corbyn left-wing surge, is being debated and that debate will now dominate the campaign to elect her successor. The front runners seem to be Richard Leonard from the left of the party and Anas Sarwar from the centre/right.

The party is over as far as the Edinburgh Festival is concerned. As predicted it's been a record-breaking 70th year. It attracted 3.6 million visitors. Sales at the official festival were up 2 per cent on last year, at the book festival they were up 4 per cent and at the fringe up 9 per cent. The Military Tattoo was sold out for the 19th successive year. Everyone seemed to have a good time. The weather played along nicely and nothing seemed to go agley.



I was one of the quarter of million people who watched the final fireworks concert in Princes Street Gardens. It was a dazzling occasion, 400,000 dazzles to be exact. Karen Matheson of the Celtic band Capercaille sang three beautiful songs at the beginning, then The Scottish Chamber Orchestra played pieces by Peter Maxwell Davies, James MacMillan and Tchaikovsky.

So yes, the Festival went out with a bang.

