

Letter from Scotland



The Great Michael returns to Newhaven for a relaunch. Leith artist, Frank Forsgard Manclark.

It was the week of the Great Relaunch last week.

Not since the launching of the Great Michael in 1511 has Scotland set out on a more audacious project. Launching her “most ambitious plans ever” Nicola Sturgeon, in effect, re-launched the SNP government after ten years in power. If we can open the largest bridge of its kind in the world on Monday, then by Tuesday surely we could become “the best wee country in the world,” to borrow a phrase from a former first minister.



First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP announces the Scottish Government’s Programme for Government 2017-18 at the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh. 05 September 2017. Pic – Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

The new programme for government outlined to parliament on Tuesday caught most observers by surprise in its sheer scope and novelty. All new petrol cars are to be phased out in Scotland by 2032, eight years ahead of the rest of the UK. A series of low emissions zones are to be introduced in our main cities. The 1 per cent pay cap for public sector workers is to be removed. A Scottish investment bank is to be established to boost the economy.

There’s to be a presumption against jail sentences of less than one year. Free personal care is to be extended to those suffering from early dementia and other conditions. A plastic bottle deposit scheme is to be introduced. A law banning the

smacking of children is to be put through parliament and the legal age of responsibility is to be raised to 12 years. And in education, the government's self-proclaimed "top priority", the amount of free child care is to be doubled and head teachers are to be given money directly to tackle the attainment gap.

And to pay for all of this, Ms Sturgeon hinted at a rise in the Scottish element of income tax in the forthcoming budget. A paper outlining the options – changes in rates and/or bands – will be published shortly. Add to this the Scottish government's campaign against "Tory austerity" and Brexit and this looks like a pretty radical programme. How much of it will succeed lies in the hands of Providence and Parliament – where, remember, the SNP do not quite have a majority.

There is, however, likely to be enough support from the Labour party, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats to push through most of the above programme and the tax rises. The Conservatives will increasingly be the odd ones out and their leader Ruth Davidson will become even more the voice of opposition in Scotland, as she is inside her own party on the UK stage.

The Labour party is in the awkward position of not having a leader in Scotland at present. The contest to succeed Kezia Dugdale split into a left/right battle this week with the confirmation of the two main candidates, Richard Leonard from the Corbynista left and Anas Sarwar from the centre/right. Both have been gathering endorsements from their respective camps and camp chiefs.



Alex Rowley MSP deputy leader Scottish Labour speaking after First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP announced the Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2017-18. 05 September

2017. Pic – Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

My own city of Edinburgh has been enjoying a quiet week – between the Festival ending and the students arriving. It's only been broken by the grinding sound of metal wheels on metal tracks as the public hearings began on what on earth went wrong with the tram project between the start in 2008 and the opening in 2014. We famously got half the track for double the cost and three years late. Council leaders at the time have been telling the inquiry that they were kept in the dark by the suits in charge.

Meanwhile, the trams themselves have proved a surprising success, carrying more passengers than expected and turning in a profit within two years. Current councillors are now contemplating going ahead with the next phase, a £165m extension from the city centre to Leith and Newhaven.



So our ambition as a nation has not been dented. We are now imagining that we might even qualify for the finals of the football World Cup. After beating Kazakhstan and Malta, we now have to beat Slovakia and Slovenia and then we're in the play-offs for a last minute place in Russia in 2018. "We've got the World Cup in our hands, says Strachan" ran The Scotsman's back page headline. We are ambition unlimited.

Afterall, dreams sometimes come true. I love the story this week of the two young boys from Peterhead who dreamed of building a ship that would sail the world's oceans. They made it from Playmobil pieces (it looked rather like the Great Michael, though not 240ft long, only 2ft) and set it off on a voyage from their local beach at the end of May. It's now been found in Norway.