

# Letter from Scotland



Blackford Pond, my Sea of Tranquility

It was a moment of peace in an otherwise rather below par week for me. Stopping by Blackford Pond, not far my house, has always been a time to find happiness. When the children were small, we would go there to feed the ducks and run round the paths. We watched the seasons change from frost, to light green leaves, to ducklings on the water, to the yellow and gold of autumn.

This week I stopped there awhile to restore my spirits.

I watched Scotland fall from 16<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> place in the latest “wellbeing” figures compiled from OECD statistics covering 32 countries. We’re still above Wales and Northern Ireland but behind England (12<sup>th</sup>) and way behind the leaders Switzerland, Norway and the United States. Wellbeing was measured by economic performance, educational standards and life expectancy.

This was not good news as we tried to celebrate 20 years of devolved government which was supposed to address some of these issues. Our First Minister Nicola Sturgeon used the occasion to call for more powers for the Scottish Parliament – including immigration – and for a guarantee that Brexit will not lead to “a power grab” by Westminster.

There was, however, some good news from the North Sea.

Oil and gas production is up nearly 3 per cent on last year and sales are up 15 per cent as the world price of oil went back up to \$50 a barrel. Agreement was reached on the guaranteed price of electricity coming from the big new wind farm being planned for the Moray Firth. At £57.50 per megawatt

hour it's still way below that offered to the new nuclear plant at Hinkley Point, £92.50, but it will allow the wind farm to be built.

Unemployment is also down, to 3.8 per cent, and the number of people in work increased to a record 2.54 million. However, wages are only rising by 2 per cent a year compared with inflation at 2.9 per cent. So workers' real pay continues to fall, as it has since the bankers' recession a decade ago.

The UK Government this week followed the lead of the Scottish Government and scrapped the 1 per cent cap on public sector pay increases. But it looks like that is going to be paid for by cutting yet more staff from the public sector. Over 1,500 jobs disappeared from local government, police and fire services and colleges in Scotland over the past year.

The pinch-point highlighted this week was the teacher shortage. One head teacher in Edinburgh even wrote to parents appealing for help in finding maths teachers for this term. In the meantime, junior pupils will have to be taught by teachers from other departments. Across Scotland there were 700 teaching posts vacant at the beginning of the academic year.

Our national pride was also dented when our best football team, Celtic, were beaten 5-0 by Paris Saint Germain, the worst home defeat for 122 years. It didn't matter that PSG's three goal scorers were worth £420m. It was a master-class we could have done without. We were out-played and out-funded.

Still, this week we are going to stage the best Gaelic festival ever. The National MOD is taking place in Fort William with 3,600 singers, pipers, dancers, actors and Gaelic sages taking part.

When things get tough, we can seek solace in our culture and our duck ponds.