

Letter from Scotland



Only half a harvest

I live in the centre of a city and yet within ten minutes' walk from my house a combine harvester was chewing up a field of ...well, it is normally wheat but this year I'm told it is field beans. It is a surprising and sobering moment for a city dweller to be confronted with the question of where our food is coming from.

I came home and looked up the National Farmers Union website to be told that things are not going well with this year's harvest. "A substantial amount of the cereal and potato harvests still have to be completed. Significant volumes of straw still have to be baled. Ground conditions are making ploughing and planting difficult." It's all due, of course, to the wet summer and the unsettled autumn.

And the weather is not the only uncertainty facing our farmers. There's Brexit and the future of farm subsidies. There's the low-price culture in the supermarkets. And there's an accumulated debt mountain, last year breaking through the £100m ceiling. Next time I walk past that field, maybe tomorrow, it will be with a deep sense of embarrassment and shame that we have left our food providers in such a slurry of uncertainty... and yes, poverty.

Just before I'd walked past that combine harvester, I'd spent my lunch hour watching Jeremy Corbyn addressing a euphoric Labour party conference in Brighton. Has the centre-ground of politics really shifted to the left, I wondered. I guess it has. I've always felt that the political elite had not really understood the pain ordinary people were suffering in the years of austerity since the bankers' crash in 2008.

I'm coming to believe the comparisons being made with Attlee's

government after the War and the Thatcher counter-revolution, that we have entered a new era and that “the people” are crying out for radical change. That has led to angry reactions like the Brexit vote, and the rise of anti-politics in Europe and America.

What will it all mean for Scotland ? Already it has meant triumph for the SNP as the radical, the anti-austerity party here. Whether it can hold on to that image or whether Labour will storm back to power is the question we are all asking. And for two men, that question is particularly interesting.

Anas Sarwar and Richard Leonard are becoming embroiled in an increasingly muddy fight for the leadership of the Scottish Labour Party. There’s been talk of a plot to unseat the former leader Kezia Dugdale and of bias by the deputy leader who is supposed to be overseeing the election.



Kezia Dugdale MSP

Both candidates have been blamed for the sins of their fathers. Mr Sarwar, from the centre/right of the party, has faced criticism because his father’s wholesale food firm apparently pays its employees less than the living wage. And Mr Leonard, from the new Corbynista wing of the party, has been blamed for his father’s decision to send him to a private school in England.

The Labour Party is not the only mud-splattered institution in Scotland this week. The new unified police service finds itself without a Chief Constable following allegations of bullying. Phil Gormley has had to step aside while three complaints against him are investigated. Police Scotland is already struggling to restore morale after a series of re-organisations and cuts among back-room staff. It also admitted this week that in order to meet its planned 2 per

cent pay rise, it will have to shed up to 600 officers.

You may think this is a good thing, after all there is less crime these days. (Recorded crime is down 3 per cent according to the latest figures.) But fighting crime is not the only thing the police do. And violent crime is actually up 6 per cent. Who, for instance, would have thought you could be killed by an arrow in a street in Dundee? It happened last weekend when a late-night party spilled out into the street and a 24 year old man died of his wounds.

Scotland has been caught in the downdraft of the Ryanair fiasco. Over a thousand flights here have been cancelled, mainly between Edinburgh or Glasgow and Stansted. I'm beginning to wonder if the pilot shortage is the beginning of the end for low-cost carriers. At least that would be good for the environment.

Happily, some good things happened this week. Celtic recovered from their 5-0 defeat by Paris Saint Germain and beat Anderlecht 3-0 in Brussels in the European Champions League.

And I have to admire the stamina of two Englishmen who came north last week to swim through the Great Glen from coast to coast. Graham Donald and Kerran Traynor pulled on their wet suits in Loch Linnhe, then spent the next ten days swimming through Loch Lochy, Loch Oich and Loch Ness, a total of 120 kilometres. It was all for the personal challenge and to raise money for Marie Curie hospices and a hospital in Africa.

But even such displays of strength and stamina are nothing compared to the daily task of bringing in the harvest and then having to dry it before it can be sold.