

Letter from Scotland



Fracking – no, nae, never.

So, after some hesitation, the Scottish government has set its face against fracking. The Energy Minister Paul Wheelhouse told parliament on Tuesday that the current moratorium on shale gas extraction is being extended indefinitely. Like the ban on new nuclear power stations, the fracking ban puts Scotland at odds with England. Along with our wind and hydro power, and our tougher climate change targets, it marks us out as a “green” nation, or at least a “greener” nation.

Managers and unions at the Ineos petro-chemical works at Grangemouth say we’re turning our backs on a shale oil bonanza worth between £1bn and £5bn and 10,000 jobs. But the Scottish government’s consultation, which attracted 60,000 responses, was overwhelmingly against fracking. And the scientific evidence was largely against, with the British Geological Survey saying shale reserves in Central Scotland were “modest” and the chief scientist at Heriot Watt University Professor John Underhill saying we were 55 million years too late, the rock structures had already “fracked” and were too complex for commercial extraction.

The only speck on the SNP Government’s green report card is the plan to cut air passenger duty. This is being strongly opposed by Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens who say it is a give-away to the rich and encourages people to fly rather than take the train. However, it seems the plan has run into a technical difficulty because the EU will not allow a special, even lower rate, for flights in the Highlands. Negotiations to clear this hurdle, it’s said, could take longer than Brexit and be almost as complicated.



SNP members gathering for their conference in Glasgow this weekend will be wondering where to take their campaign for independence from here. Nicola Sturgeon has put a second referendum on the back burner, at least until the whole Brexit drama has come to its likely tragic end. In her programme for government announced to parliament last month she tried to set new targets for the next decade of SNP rule...beginning the switch to electric cars, closing the school attainment gap, coping with “Westminster austerity” by hinting at a rise in Scottish income tax, at least for the wealthy.

But there’s also bound to be uncertainty over the party’s future popularity. The General Election in May saw the number of SNP MPs at Westminster fall from 50 to 37. In the Scottish elections last year, the SNP lost its majority at Holyrood. It’s also seen the rise of the Tartan Tories in the Borders and the North East and it’s facing the Corbyn bounce in the Labour Party.



I wouldn’t be surprised too if there wasn’t some talk at the conference about Catalonia, the latest independence-seeking region in Europe. There can be no direct comparison, of course, since Britain has not seen a civil war since the 18th century and Westminster rule is not the same as Franco’s dictatorship. But the idea of “independence in Europe” will not be seen as the easy alternative to Brexit it once was.

There’s also a slight worry over the Scottish economy, with the latest growth figure dropping to 0.1 per cent in the quarter to June. That’s a third of the rate for the UK as whole. Production fell by 0.7 per cent. Construction was also down, due to projects like the new Forth Crossing and the M8 improvements coming to an end. And although employment is up, wages are still falling behind inflation.

The Scottish Health Survey also published its results this

week, finding, not surprisingly, that people in poor areas suffer poorer health and take less exercise than people living in rich areas. It also found that the number of adults eating our recommended five portions of fruit and vegetables a day has fallen to 20 per cent, its lowest level since recording began in 2003. Children are eating only three portions a day.

But still the Bank of Scotland is insisting that we are happier than we ever were. According to its happiness index we are 8 per cent happier than we were last year- unless you live in the poorer areas of Glasgow. People there are 40 contentment points less happy than people living in Central Scotland. The older you are the happier you are, according to the bank, and the happiest group of all are households with an income of between £40,000 and £60,000 a year.

I'll bet, though, that the happiest creatures in Scotland this week are our performing elephants, lions, tigers and other exotic animals. MSPs have approved the general principles of the Wild Animals in Travelling Circuses (Scotland) Bill. When the new law comes into effect, Scotland will become the first part of the UK to ban any wild animal from being used in a circus act. No longer will elephants have to dress up as ballerinas or lions snarl furiously at the ringmaster and jump through hula hoops.

But penguin parades at the zoo will not be affected. Nor will displays of birds of prey or reindeer sleighs at Christmas time...until we next have pity on our earth-born companions and fellow mortals.