

# Letter from Scotland

Seventy years ago work began on building the council housing estate where I now live. What a different world it was then. But now that housing has come to the top of the political agenda again it's worth making a few comparisons.



The Inch "garden estate", Edinburgh.

The Inch estate in south Edinburgh was conceived in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War. Councillors were determined to raise the living standards of ordinary people and raise their spirits. It's no co-incidence that the Edinburgh Festival began in that same year, 1947. The Inch was going to be Scotland's first "garden estate", built in the grounds of the 17<sup>th</sup> century Inch House, keeping the mature trees and park land and arranged carefully across the hill side with views of Arthur's Seat.

It would have its own school, shops and playing fields. It would be like the Promised Land for families moving out of the city slums. An architectural competition attracted 68 entries. The winner was a young man from Gloucester, David Stratton Davis, who did a brilliant job, both in the interlocking layout of the estate but also in the design of each house and flat. It was a practical and economical design, as befitted the post-war times, but it's laced with hedges and grassy squares and little quirky Gloucester-style touches such as curved crescents, Regency porches and balconies. Over 1800 homes were built in three short years at a cost of £1,400 each (£54,000 today).

I would have preferred a more Scottish style but this was the 1940s and 50s, and no doubt it appeared very trendy at the time. But now, of course, individual owners are busy spoiling the charm of the place by digging up the hedges and concreting

the gardens to create driveways for that passing fad, the motor car.

This is just one of the worrying comparisons worth making. Our individualist age is spoiling the very things we value, such as our environment. The invisible hand is making a mess. Mrs Thatcher's sale of council houses in the 1980s was supposed to create an ideal property-owning democracy.

But people in my estate were sold their houses at way below their true value. No new council houses were built and no thought was given to a factoring service so that properties could be maintained. In the end the rush towards deregulation and property ownership resulted in the great crash of 2008. And it has left us with a massive housing shortage and a younger generation who cannot afford their first homes.



Prime Minister Theresa May in fine voice ahead of the 2017 General Election speaking in Granton

The Prime Minister Theresa May made "housing" the highlight of her coughing speech at the Conservative Party Conference last week. But her £2bn programme of "affordable" house building will only build 5,000 homes a year, whereas her own manifesto estimated that Britain needs 300,000 new homes a year for the next five years. In Scotland, the SNP Government has promised to build 50,000 new "affordable" homes in the same period and it's also setting up a series of "rent control zones" in some of our housing hotspots.

But all of this is timid compared to the vision and courage shown by those post-war governments and councils which built estates like mine all across the UK. Well, nearly like mine. The Inch is somewhere special. And to prove we are a cut above all others, each street is named after people and places in the novels of Sir Walter Scott.

The other issue which has dominated the news agenda this week has been energy prices. Mrs May promised to cap the standard tariff any energy company can charge. In Scotland Nicola Sturgeon told her party conference this week that the Scottish Government is to set up a state-owned energy company to supply gas and electricity at "as near as possible to wholesale prices".

How either of these schemes will work has not been spelled out. To me, it all looks like a mad folly to try to put a general limit on energy prices. They are bound to go up, no matter what. And it's a good thing that we should place a high value on our energy to encourage us to use less of it and perhaps save the planet from destruction. Such schemes are all a distraction from the real issue, which is poverty. A third of households in Scotland are so poor they are spending 10 per cent, or more, of their income on fuel bills.

The Chancellor, Philip Hammond, meanwhile, has begun work on his own budget, due next month. Amidst all the voices urging an easing of "austerity" and preparations for our leap into the dark over Brexit, there was heard a still small voice from the Highlands. The whisky industry wants a cut in its 80 per cent tax rate, saying sales have gone down 2.6 per cent since Mr Hammond increase the tax last year. However, export sales – not subject to UK tax – are booming and we heard this week that two old distilleries are being brought back into use, one in Port Ellen on Islay and the other at Brora in Sutherland.

And while we're in Sutherland, can I alert readers to the next big conservation battle over golf courses. Yes another American multi-millionaire wants to go where Donald Trump dared to tread. Mike Keiser has submitted plans to Highlands Council for an 18 hole golf course on the sand dunes at Coul Links. Half a dozen conservation organisations are preparing to fight the plans saying the golf course would be a disaster for wildlife and for one of the most important dune systems on the Scottish coastline.

Finally, it's all over for Gordon Strachan, our unfortunate national football manager. Scotland's failure to make it into the World Cup finals and last year's failure to get into the European finals have proved too much for the Scottish Football Association's patience and, one suspects, for Gordon's. It's a pity. His Scotland team has played well on several occasions – but not, alas, on all. We have to come to terms with the fact that we are a small nation and we cannot be the best at everything, even at the game we first invented in 1633.

*My best wishes to Gordon Strachan. Scotland manager is never an easy job, but he deserves our thanks for his service.*  
<https://t.co/CqkvPcXliv>

– Nicola Sturgeon (@NicolaSturgeon) [October 12, 2017](#)