

# Letter from Scotland



## Our wind-blown future

This week Scotland found itself on the world stage as one of the pioneers of renewable energy. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon was sharing the limelight with the German Chancellor, the French President and the UN Secretary General who all gathered in Bonn for the latest international conference on climate change.

Ms Sturgeon was able to boast that Scotland has cut its greenhouse gas emissions by 38 per cent since 1990, that half our electricity now comes from renewable sources and we are planning to cut our emissions by 90 per cent by 2050. The SNP's programme for government includes a switch to all-electric cars by 2032, the introduction of low-emissions zones in the main cities, a major re-forestation programme and the continuing expansion of renewable energy, particularly in the North Sea. (Construction begins next year on four large wind farms in the Tay and Forth estuaries.)

But even as Ms Sturgeon was speaking, one of the companies moving on from building oil rigs to off-shore wind turbines, Bifab, was warning it may have to go into "administration" because of cash-flow problems. It has a workforce of 1,400 people at three fabrication yards, Burntisland and Methil in Fife and Arnish in the Western Isles.

The road to renewables is not easy. Wave and tide power projects have had a slow, stumbling start. Carbon capture projects have had their funding withdrawn. On-shore wind-farms have encountered more and more opposition. And the Scottish Government (unlike the UK Government) has set its face against new nuclear power – it argues that, apart from environmental concerns, it is twice as expensive as wind power.

So Scotland marches on with its wind turbines, sure in the knowledge that we possess 25 per cent of Europe's wind resources. But whether we can fulfill Alex Salmond's prediction of being the "Saudi Arabia of renewables" remains to be seen.

However, Scotland is set to become a world leader in quite another field. We are to be the first county in the world to introduce minimum pricing for alcohol. This week the efforts by the whisky industry to block the measure in the courts came to an end with a Supreme Court ruling that minimum pricing was not a restriction on trade. It means a minimum price of 50p per unit of alcohol will be introduced, probably next year, meaning that drinks at the cheaper end of the market, such as cider, will cost considerably more, in some cases twice as much, and special promotions will be impossible.

The Scottish Parliament passed the new law back in 2011 with the intention of tackling Scotland's binge drinking culture. We have one of the highest death rates from alcohol in Europe and an average of 670 people every week are admitted to hospital as a result of strong drink.

The doctors will be pleased. Hardly a week goes by without a story about strains on the health service. This week, GP's were offered a new contract to try to counteract the rush to early retirement and the handing back of GPs independent practices because of work-load pressures. The health secretary Shona Robison offered a practice income guarantee (assuming a salary for individual GPs of £80,000 a year), plus help with the cost of premises and measures to reduce doctors' workload by introducing more nurses and other health specialists.

And hardly a week goes by without the continuing story of Brexit. The issue this week was the EU Withdrawal Bill, repatriating European legislation to English and Scots law. Nicola Sturgeon met Theresa May in London on Tuesday to try to

reach agreement on which powers would be transferred to the Scottish Parliament but Ms Sturgeon emerged saying she could still not recommend that MSPs approve the Bill. And so the constitutional stand-off continues.



Richard Leonard one of the leadership contenders

The Scottish Labour Party, meanwhile, awaits a new leader. This weekend the votes are counted in the closely fought ideological battle between Anas Sarwar from the centre/right of the party and Richard Leonard from the left. And just to add further tension to the occasion, the man who was supposed to be supervising the election, the deputy leader Alex Rowley, has had to step aside after allegations – which he denies – that he sent abusive text messages to a former girl-friend.

But the story which touched our rawest nerve this week was the discovery of an illegal puppy farm in Aberdeenshire. Police, SSPCA officers and a vet raided the farm near Fyvie and rescued nearly 90 dogs, most of them puppies, being held in a series of small cages in appalling conditions. It's thought they were to be sold over the internet for Christmas.

We may have begun the week as a proud nation setting high international standards. We've ended it humbled by our own faults and failings.