

Letter from Scotland



A policeman's lot is not a happy one.

This week we've been asking ourselves: is Scotland's fairly new national police force in crisis? Certainly a policeman's lot is not a happy one at the moment...whether you are one of the five senior officers suspended from duty, or one of the 17,000 officers on the beat.

Police Scotland – to give it its new-fangled name – has been beset by problems since it was formed from the old eight regional forces in 2013. The idea was to save money and increase efficiency but soon there were concerns over the cut in back room staff, and 60 local police stations have been closed. A new computer system failed to work, regional control centres were shut down, a number of emergency calls went unanswered for days, and there are constant reports of low morale and stretched resources.

In recent months the supervising body, the Scottish Police Authority, has lost its chairman and its chief executive. The first chief constable left early. The current chief constable is on special leave pending an investigation into allegations of misconduct. And in recent days an assistant chief constable and three other senior officers have been suspended after allegations of misconduct and even criminal behaviour.

And yet the justice secretary Michael Matheson told MSPs there was no crisis. Normal policing was being carried out, which was, he said, “a match for anywhere in the world.”

While it is true that the overall crime figures are at a 43-year low, violent crime has shown a slight rise in the last year. And the police are facing new challenges in the form of terror alerts, cyber-crime and the rise in the number of sexual crimes being reported.

The opposition parties have accused Mr Matheson of complacency but I suppose there is little he can do while so much is falling apart around him. The allegations – all denied by the way – may turn out to be untrue or trivial and the low morale may simply be the teething problems of a new organisation. Meanwhile, he can only hope that the new chair of the SPA, Susan Deacon, and the Acting Chief Constable Iain Livingstone can put the force back on its feet.



Queensferry Crossing

Police Scotland is not the only thing to fall apart this week. We were shocked to learn that the new £1.3bn Queensferry Crossing – to give the new bridge its new-fangled name – is to be partially closed for repairs, only two months after it opened. It appears, though, that we were supposed to know this would happen.

At First Minister's Questions Nicola Sturgeon was keen to "put it into perspective" when she was asked to explain why the SNP had apparently rushed the job to get the bridge finished on time. Every large construction project had "snagging issues", Ms Sturgeon explained, and these would be fixed in the next week. Meanwhile, northbound traffic will continue to use the bridge while southbound traffic will be diverted onto the old Forth Road Bridge. It then emerged that there will be further partial closures next year but these will only be at off-peak times.

There have been other disappointments too. Only four out of Scotland's regional health boards have met their waiting time targets. It means one in five people are having to wait more than 18 weeks between referral by a GP and actually receiving treatment, the worst result since the targets were introduced six years ago.

Local councils too are feeling the strain of government

austerity. The Accounts Commission reported this week that real cuts to council budgets would mean that spending would have to be cut next year by a further £300m and councils would have to use over £100m of their reserves. Already councils are having to spend an average of 10 per cent of their budgets on debt payments.

As you will have gathered, there has been little to celebrate this week. But we are looking forward to the return of the Argyllshire man Billy Irving who has been held in jail in India for the last four years. He is one of the so-called Chennai Six, former British soldiers serving as anti-piracy guards on board a ship in the Indian Ocean. They were accused of unlawfully bearing arms, a charge finally quashed this week by an appeal court judge in India. But why, everyone is asking, did it take so long ?



Dr Elsie
Inglis

We have also been celebrating the life of one of those feisty Edinburgh Suffragettes, Dr Elsie Inglis, who died exactly 100 years ago.

Her services as a doctor were refused by the British Army at the outbreak of the First World War, so she went off to France and set up the Scottish Women's Hospitals which cared for wounded soldiers in no fewer than 17 war zones across Europe.



Photo courtesy of University of Edinburgh

She also founded a medical collage for women in Edinburgh and a maternity hospital. The quad in today's Edinburgh University medical school has been named in her honour.

Why is it that all our heroes live in the past ?