

Letter from Scotland

The Christmas merry-go-rounds in Edinburgh this year include “The Drop”, an 80m high tower on George Street. Mad merry-makers are spun up to the top of the tower and then “dropped” to the ground in a screaming descent which would terrify me. But, in a way, this is what we’ve all been enduring in this year of austerity, terror attacks, wars and catastrophes abroad and Brexit obsessions at home.

<http://www.theedinburghreporter.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/the-drop.mp4>

In Scotland the year has ended with a signal from the SNP government that it’s had enough of “The Drop”. The finance minister Derek Mackay says he’s reversing Westminster austerity with a budget which raises income tax on the rich and cuts it for the poor. He’s also going to end the one per cent freeze on public sector pay.

It’s a bold move, distancing Scotland from the rest of the UK and making use, for the first time, of the Scottish parliament’s income tax powers. So a Scots worker earning less than £13,850 a year will pay £20 less in tax than in England or Wales, i.e. a bottom rate of 19p in the pound, rather than 20p. There are to be five tax bands, not just three, and they rise to a 46 per cent tax rate on incomes over £150,000. So someone earning, say £40,000 will pay an extra £70 a year in income tax and someone on £90,000 will pay an extra £1,056.

Mr Mackay told MSPs that more than half of all workers will be paying less in tax but because of the higher tax on the rich, he will raise an estimated £164m more in revenue each year. It’s a modest amount compared with the overall Scottish budget of £30bn but it nearly reverses the cut imposed by Westminster and it’s an important political gesture.

It will mean more money for the struggling NHS and, perhaps

for local council services. I say “perhaps” because the SNP need the support of the Greens to get their budget through parliament and the Greens, like last year, are insisting on a better settlement for local government.

The Labour Party says all this amounts to is “tinkering around the edges” of Tory austerity and it has called for a 50 per cent tax rate on the highest earners. The Conservatives have condemned it as a “Nat tax”, saying it punishes success and will damage economic growth.

But at least this budget has brought the year to an end with something solid. Because the rest of 2017 has been a year of political hot air. The SNP have been breathing fire over Brexit, opposing it at every turn, and threatening to call a second referendum on Scottish independence. That was until the general election in June which saw the SNP lose a third of their 56 seats at Westminster. The Conservatives were cheering in Scotland until they saw Theresa May lose their majority at Westminster.

Labour meanwhile staged a surprise recovery – if a modest one – and have gone on to elect a Corbynite as leader. Yorkshireman Richard Leonard replaced Kezia Dugdale who went off to be a celebrity in the Australian jungle.



Beyond politics, the year has had some modest successes. We built the new Queensferry Crossing over the Firth of Forth, on budget and only a little late. We weathered the wettest summer on record fairly well. And while the men let us down in sport, our women’s football team qualified for the European championships for the first time, beating Spain, performing well against Portugal and but going down 6-0 to England.

The Scot of the year for me was Mark Beaumont who cycled 18,000 miles around the world in less than 80 days. That’s an average of 240 miles a day and 44 days shorter than the

previous record.

But as the year ends, it's worth breaking a Scottish habit and remembering that we are one of the luckiest countries in the world. We have avoided the wars in Syria and Iraq, the refugee crisis in Europe, the hurricanes in the Caribbean, the floods in Bangladesh, the earthquakes in Mexico, Iran, Japan, New Zealand and Italy.

We've also escaped the terror attacks which have struck London and Birmingham and avoided the tragedy of a tower block fire like Grenfell.

But "every man's death diminishes me" and I cannot help but give the year 2017 a low mark...maybe 4 out of 10. Brexit, Trump, the rise of the Right, the weakness of the UN, and the onward rush towards climate change leave me only with the hope that "The Drop" will stop, or at least slow down, in 2018.