

Letter from Scotland



Moving on from Christmas lights into the darkness.

Looking beyond the dazzling Christmas lights is a little frightening. First there's the boom of the Hogmanay fireworks, then that unsettling silence at the start of the New Year and finally we step out bravely into the unknown.

Here in Edinburgh, the midnight fireworks will last an unprecedented 9 minutes...not to mention an earlier children's display. The city council has spent £800,000 putting on this Hogmanay show... a torchlight parade, a rock concert, a street party, a carnival with big wheel, ice-rink etc and a cold dip in the Firth of Forth to sober up on New Year's Day.

Aberdeen, Inverness and Stirling are also staging firework spectacles at the midnight hour. Less showy towns like Glasgow and Dundee have given up on the municipal firework competition and are leaving individual venues to stage their own celebrations. But the "wee town" events are going ahead as usual, strange practices like the Fireball Parade in Stonehaven and the Big Bonfire in Biggar, traditions that go back to pagan times.

But the quieter days over New Year give us a chance to reflect on where we are in the great scheme of things. Specifically this year, "How have we got ourselves into this mess and how are we going to get out of it?" I'm thinking of Brexit, of course, and the continuing austerity at home but also of the Middle Eastern wars, the refugee crisis, the nuclear stand-off with North Korea, and the looming problems of energy shortages and climate change.

Here in Scotland, 2018 is going to be the year when we come to terms with higher income taxes for the middle and upper

classes, with higher prices for alcohol to discourage us from binge-drinking, and the continuing struggle to fund the health service and our free education system. That's a tough agenda for any government and I guess the SNP will suffer for it.

Labour meanwhile will have to find its way under its new leader Richard Leonard. How far to the left will he go? The Scottish Conservatives have a similar problem. How far left will they go, to distance themselves from Calamity May in London? The Greens and the Liberal Democrats will be left like sparrows fighting for the scraps.

No doubt all parties will jump on the bandwagon of this year's common cause "The Year of Young People". All 8-26 year-olds will be encouraged to take part in a series of local and national events to highlight their achievements and their prospects.

500 young "ambassadors" will be chosen from different areas of the country to drive the events forward...theatre productions, science exhibitions and music festivals. It's an admission that we older folk have neglected our young in recent years. Think of cuts to education, lack of well-paid jobs, student debt, the housing crisis, our failure to make a start on future issues such as climate change, automation, infrastructure renewal.

Looking forward to 2018 is not easy. An optimist is blinded by the light, a pessimist is blinded by the darkness. A realist can only see a fairly empty diary.

There will be a Winter Olympics in South Korea in February, the Commonwealth Games in Australia in April, the Royal Wedding in May, the World Cup in Russia in June. We'll mark 100 years since the end of the First World War in November.

But it's the unpredictable events that frighten me. What will the weather throw at us? Will there be a catastrophic volcano or earthquake? What will terrorists or mentally unstable

people do to us? Will the politicians behave or will they fumble us into disaster?

Answers: see this column on December 31st 2018. And good luck.