

Letter from Scotland



Rising above it all on the
Pentland Ridge

I count myself lucky. Last weekend I was able to go on my favourite afternoon walk along the Pentland Ridge while the rest of the Scottish population was in bed suffering from flu. Or at least 104 in every 100,000 were, that's double the rate of last week, which in turn was doubled the rate of the week before. And if people were not suffering from H3NS, the so-called "Aussie Flu", they were suffering from "man flu", which others describe simply as "a cold."

One healthy young woman from Applecross on the north west coast died when her flu developed into pneumonia. There were another seven deaths among elderly or vulnerable patients and over 30 others needed intensive care in hospital.

The hospitals were overrun. Waiting times lengthened. Only 78 per cent of patients were treated within four hours, well below the target of 95 per cent. The flu outbreak came on top of a surge in broken-bone injuries due to the icy weather. The Labour Party highlighted the case of one elderly man from Midlothian who had to wait over three hours for an ambulance after a fall on New Year's Day. He then waited 13 hours on a trolley in a hospital corridor before a bed was found for him in a ward.

Of course, the opposition parties blamed the SNP government...for a shortage of beds, failure to plan for winter pressures, for a patchy vaccination programme, for lack of basic funding for the NHS. The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said "sorry" to the patients affected but pointed out that the NHS in Scotland was managing the flu outbreak better than any other part of the UK.

Both Ms Sturgeon and Theresa May moved quickly on to talk about the environment. The Prime Minister announced a war on plastic, but not until 2042. Scotland is to take more immediate action against plastic cotton buds which end up polluting many of our beaches. (There are 29 on every 100metres of beach surveyed by the Marine Conservation Society). There's to be a ban on their manufacture and sale.

The saga of our chief constable has continued this week. Phil Gormley has been on "special leave" since September after allegations of bullying were made against him by several senior officers. Last month the Scottish Police Authority decided he could return to work while investigations continue but after the Justice Secretary Michael Matheson began asking questions, the Authority changed its mind. So was Mr Matheson right to interfere in what should be a purely operational matter ? The debate rages on against a background of other awkward questions: is there a bullying culture inside Police Scotland ? Is the SPA a competent and truly independent agency ? Should Scotland's eight regional police forces have been merged into Police Scotland in the first place ?

I must admit I knew little about the island of Ulva till this week. But I've learned that it is an island 7 miles long and 2 miles wide off the west coast of Mull and it's been put up for sale. The residents – 6 on the island and 400 on the rest of Mull – have just voted by 64 per cent to try for a community buy-out. They need to raise around £4m but it's hoped the Scottish government's Community Land Fund will make a substantial contribution. And if you live in Australia you may be interested in investing in your founding father's homeland because the great Lachlan Macquarie was born on Ulva in 1762.

The North West Mull Community Trust are following the example set by the people of Eigg who bought their island in 1997 and have since seen its population grow by 60 per cent to over a 100. There is now a primary school, a community shop, a major forestry project and, of course, a strong tourist industry.

✘ Finally, I'm pleased to report that Edinburgh's Hogmanay and Christmas celebrations were a financial success. 750,000 tickets were sold for the official events, up 13 per cent on last year. The weather was kind, people seemed pleased with the parades, the concerts, the ceilidhs, the shows, the fun-fair, the street markets, and the famous fireworks.

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But of course someone had to go and spoil the celebrations with an attack on Greyfriars' Bobby, or at least his owner's grave. The memorial stone to Auld Jock who died in 1858 has been knocked over and damaged, just as the Lord Provost is about to lead the annual commemoration of the trusty wee Skye terrier who guarded his master's grave for 14 years.

In these trying times we all need a watchdog.