

Letter from Scotland



Arthur's Seat enjoying the calm between the storms.

We think we live a precarious existence between raging snow storms but actually Scotland is blessed with a benign climate. Yes, we have had snow this week and 80mph winds along the west coast but compared with other northern counties it's been nothing much to write a letter about.

But I'm going to tell you anyway. So, 200 drivers got stuck overnight on the M74 near Moffat and the M8 was at a standstill for a time in West Lothian. The usual high level roads in Aberdeenshire and the Highlands were blocked by snow. Schools in Dumfriesshire, the Borders and the Highlands were closed. All this happened on Tuesday/Wednesday but by Thursday we were in a melting lull before the next snow storm arrived.

And the theme of "icy blast/followed by calm" carried on into the rest of our lives. A chill wind blew through the economy when Carillion, the huge public sector contractor, went bust. 20,000 jobs across Britain were in jeopardy. It looked like privatisation, even capitalism itself, was in crisis. But then came the news that other contractors would be taking over projects like the Aberdeen by-pass and the new platforms at Waverly Station. The banks stepped in to make sure workers and sub-contractors were paid. Even the pension black hole is being filled in by the government's Pensions Protection Fund.

There was another scary moment when the Scottish Government published its analysis of the effect Brexit might have on our economy. A hard Brexit, under World Trade Organisation rules, would, the paper says, leave Scotland 8 per cent poorer or £12.7bn a year worse off – £2,300 per person. But even the softest Brexit, remaining in the Customs Union and Single

Market, would leave us 2.7 per cent worse off or £4bn – £700 per person. There would also be a sharp drop in investment, ranging from 10 per cent to 3 per cent.

The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon used the figures to remind the UK government that she will make up her mind on whether to call a second referendum on Scottish independence later this year, when it becomes clear what form Brexit is going to take.

She also highlighted the need for Scotland to have a more relaxed immigration policy to be able to attract young workers and boost the economy...which we learnt this week is growing at just 0.6 per cent, compared to the UK rate of 1.8 per cent.

Meanwhile the SNP at Westminster have been pointing to the embarrassment the Scottish Tories have found themselves in by failing to persuade their “London masters” that the Withdrawal Bill (from the EU) needs to include a clause guaranteeing that powers devolved to Scotland (particularly over agriculture) will not be [grabbed back](#) by Westminster when they return to the UK. The Tories insist it will all be put right when the Bill is considered in the House of Lords.

While the Brexit wars were going on, there was a little noticed deal being reached in The Scottish Parliament over the budget. The Greens have squeezed out another £150m for local councils in exchange for their support for the SNP budget as a whole. It means it will now be passed and those tax rises for the middle and upper income earners will go ahead.

Despite all the warnings about more snow and high winds on the way – the forecasters are looking grim-faced as a write – there is another winter festival about to begin which will shelter us from the stormy blast. Deep in the warm embrace of the city of Glasgow, “Celtic Connections” begins today. It’s celebrating its 25th year. Over 2,000 folk musicians from all over the world – including a pipe band from Iran – will be performing in 300 different venues over the next 18 days. The

100,000 fans will no doubt generate their own heat.

But some folk still prefer the outdoors, whatever the weather. Braving the icy blast on Monday were hardy parties of anglers on various parts of the River Tay. They were there for the traditional opening of the salmon fishing season, complete with pipe bands and local Provosts pouring whisky upon the sacred waters. But not many salmon turned up. In fact the run of young salmon last year was particularly low and salmon catches over the summer were half what they should be.

This has prompted the local fisheries board to issue an edict: all salmon caught in the spring have to be put back in the water and only one fish taken home per day in the summer and none of them female or hen-salmon.

I think I've just discovered a new Scottish Proverb: "There's more to fishing than just catching fish."