

# Letter from Scotland



Sing something else – the battle against sectarianism

It seems stamping out sectarianism in Scotland is not easy. This week, The Scottish Parliament repealed a law passed only seven years ago which made it a specific offence at football matches to stir up religious hatred. It was taken to mean a ban on singing sectarian songs by fans of either Celtic or Rangers.

The trouble with the new law was that it was difficult to enforce, or even to define, and it led to protests by fans who thought they were being unduly criminalised. It was also pointed out that sectarian behaviour could just as well be prosecuted under the existing law of breach of the peace.

James Kelly, a Labour MSP for Glasgow who sponsored the repeal of the Offensive Behaviour at Football Act, said there was no evidence of any reduction in sectarianism since the introduction of the act. It had broken the trust between police and fans, he said. It had been a cheap and easy response by the SNP government to a series of regrettable incidents when what was needed was an education campaign to tackle the root causes of religious bigotry and hatred.

The community safety minister Annabelle Ewing was 'deeply disappointed'. The act, she said, should be improved rather than scrapped in order to tackle the toxic problem of sectarian behaviour.

Meanwhile, the rest of us have been worrying about another Cold War with Russia. Scotland's small part in the Skripal poisoning affair was Alex Salmond's TV show on "Russia Today" the Moscow-financed broadcasting station in Britain. Our former First Minister looked a little older and a little rattled when he appeared on screen to reassure viewers that he was a completely free agent (if we can use that word) and his show was in no way censored or approved by the Russian government.

Nicola Sturgeon made it quite plain she did not approve of Alex's independent stand. And she didn't like Mark McDonald's either. He's the MSP for Aberdeen Donside who has been forced to resign from the SNP after admitting sending a series of inappropriate messages to women. Nevertheless he turned up in parliament this week to take his seat as an independent. He was apparently given an office in the basement.

Ms Sturgeon spent part of her week away on important business in London. She met the Prime Minister and gave her the Scottish Government's full support for the actions she's taking against Russia. But they went on to discuss the ongoing deadlock over Brexit, even hinting at an agreement over which powers will be devolved directly to the Scottish parliament when, and if, (yes, "and if") we leave the European Union.

Among the many worries 62 per cent of us have about Brexit, is what effect it will have on our population figures. We learned this week that our birth rate has fallen to a 17 year low. Only 52,872 babies were born in Scotland last year but 57,883 people died. The total population grew slightly, but only because of immigration, and we are becoming more and more elderly. So the SNP government is arguing not only that

Britain should stay in the Customs Union and the Single Market but also have its own, more liberal, immigration policy.

We were treated this week to the latest round in the Battle of Culloden, not the one in 1746 but the rather gentler, and rather farcical, battle between a housing developer and battlefield protectors. A plan to build 16 houses just half a mile from the battlefield, on land in the care of the National Trust, was at first refused by Highland Council, then amended, then approved by the Scottish Government and now.....well, we don't know exactly what happened at the Council on Tuesday.

On the face of it, a planning sub-committee voted 5-3 in favour of the amended development. But it appears there was a mix-up over the voting and those against the plans have won the right of appeal to the full committee. The developers are off to consult their lawyers and it looks the protesters will have to stage another march to Culloden Moor, with their kilts and banners flying, as they did in the snows of December.

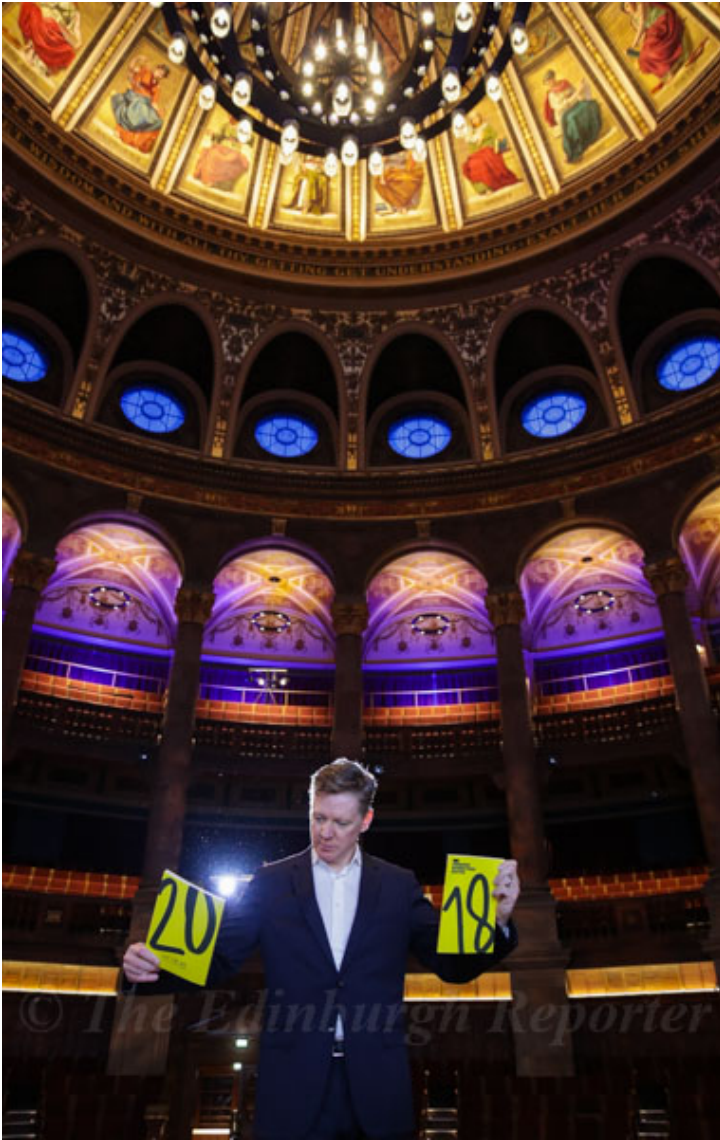


Photo John Preece

Finally, the programme for this summer's official Edinburgh International Festival has been unveiled. It will focus on youth, this being Scotland's "Year of Young People".

There's to be a pop festival at the reborn Leith Theatre and the National Youth Choir and Orchestra will be performing up-town.

Over 700 young people from 50 countries will be taking part. But there's also to be stuff for us older folk. There will be French opera and theatre, big time orchestras from Oslo, London, Birmingham and Baltimore, and outdoor shows at the Usher Hall and the Palace to commemorate the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the First World War.

It will be another "Greatest Show on Earth" and that's before we even hear what's on at the Fringe.