

Letter from Scotland



“The yellow’s on the broom.” Arthur’s Seat decked in his spring colours.

It’s been a week of two halves...good news and bad news. It started with a bank holiday weekend of joyously warm weather and happy events and then a cooler reality set in with a chilly wind and less encouraging news.

To begin with the sunshine. The temperature last weekend reached 23 degrees Celsius on the east coast, and the beaches and parks were crowded with families creeping out of hibernation to enjoy the warmest day of the year so far. The sun even shone in Glasgow, where at least 40,000 people turned up for the “All Under One Banner” march organised by “Yes” to independence campaigners. It was shining too in Edinburgh (after a wet start) for the annual Pedal on Parliament organised by cycling campaigners.



Pedal on Parliament

But as the week went on, the weather became unsettled and the news became unsettling. We've slipped to 18th in the ranking of the world's richest countries, according to the independent "Scottish Trends" think tank. Our standard of living has fallen sharply because of the banking crash and the fall in North Sea oil revenue.

The effect of "austerity" in the public services has become ever more obvious with news this week of NHS waiting time targets being missed – in 100,000 cases since 2012, according to a Labour Party study. The Conservatives say a quarter of our roads are in an unsatisfactory state – they've counted 153,310 potholes. And official figures show that spending per primary school pupil has fallen by nearly 10 per cent since 2010.

The SNP government has a reply to each of these dismal statistics, along the lines of "we're reversing the trend and we're doing it more than any other party is promising." But the spending reversals are so small (in the case of schools 0.3 per cent) that they are hardly noticeable. And the bigger picture is that the Scottish government's budget is still

limited by Westminster.

The most shocking statistic of the week came from a Glasgow University study which found that one in nine young adults in Scotland had attempted suicide. Almost a quarter (22 per cent) of 18 to 34 year olds admitted thinking about killing themselves at some past point in their lives. It's led to calls for yet more spending on mental health services. But the real cure – in my view – is to create more worthwhile jobs for young people, build more affordable homes and rebalance wealth between the generations. At the moment, the young get a bad deal.

The air of gloom became darker with the news that we may be losing our greatest sporting hero, Sir Alex Ferguson. He suffered a brain haemorrhage at home on Saturday. You could almost hear the national gasp of dismay, like a crowd of supporters watching a missed goal. Everyone, from football star to first minister, was tweeting their sadness at the news and their hopes for Sir Alex's recovery. His last club, Manchester United, which he took to 24 major titles over 26 years, soon issued a statement saying his treatment in hospital was going well and there were later stories of him sitting up in bed and talking.

Sir Alex was born in Glasgow in 1941, the son of a Clydeside shipbuilder. He started playing for a local boys club in Govan and went on to play for Dunfermline and then Rangers. He became a highly successful manager of Aberdeen FC and briefly took over the Scottish national team on the death of Jock Stein in 1985 before moving to Manchester United. There he became the avatar for what all Scots would like to be – working class, tough, fair, determined, honest, hard-working, generous, successful and rich.

To end this week of two halves here's some good news. It comes from a tough, determined, honest, hard-working community on the very north west edge of Scotland. Aird Uig at Gallan

Head on the Isle of Lewis was a radar station during the Cold War but two years ago it was bought by the community and is transforming itself into a “dark sky” observatory and a whale watching centre. The population has now risen to 30. There’s a new visitor centre offering singing lessons, a community pizza oven and a chess club inspired by the fact that the famous Lewis chessmen were discovered on a beach just a mile away.

All they need now is some good weather.