

Letter from Scotland



Where is wisdom to be found ? Photo by Hans Splinter

Phew, the exam season is nearly over. Scotland's 137,000 pupils and their 23,000 teachers will be mightily relieved. It all began with Urdu on 30th April and will end with Gaelic on Monday. It's now up to the Scottish Qualifications Authority to mark the 180 different exams and issue the dreaded results on 7th August.

Last year, the pass rate in the Higher exams was 77 per cent and 28,700 pupils got places at university. The trouble is that this didn't reflect the pupil population as a whole. Only 13 per cent of university students come from deprived backgrounds, compared to a target of 20 per cent. And this week our 19 universities – and particularly the four ancient universities – were taken to task by the universities minister Shirley-Anne Somerville for their lack of progress on "inclusion."

The universities say they simply don't get enough applications from pupils in deprived areas. That's a reflection of the

famous “attainment gap” that the Scottish government is intent on closing. The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has bravely made it her top priority. But it’s a huge task. At present only 85 per cent of school leavers in poor areas go on to “positive destinations” – work, training or further education. That compares with 96 per cent from rich areas. And the reason is obvious and fundamental...poverty.

Our new Fiscal Commission warned this week that the Scottish economy can only be expected to grow at 1 per cent over the next few years and real wages will actually fall. Meaning that tax revenues will fall too – by £200m. So unless tax rates go up, public spending will be cut again. The finance minister Derek Mackay complained in parliament that he was being held in an austerity “straitjacket” by the Tory government at Westminster.

Of course, the Tories and Labour lay the blame for austerity on the SNP. But neither have yet explained where they would find the money to stem the slow erosion of the public services. We were given two further examples this week with the Auditor General pointing out that the fire service needs £400m to upgrade its old fire engines and fire stations and Police Scotland needs £200m to pay for a new computer system. (Incidentally, the existing system recorded a slight rise in crime last year – driven by a 12 per cent rise in the number of sexual crimes being reported.)

The Royal Bank of Scotland held its usual stormy AGM in Edinburgh on Wednesday. Despite the bank being back in profit for the first time since the great crash of 2008, shareholders were angry at the planned closure of 62 branches in Scotland. I should say “some” shareholders, because the biggest shareholder – the UK Treasury which still owns 70 per cent of the bank – has been silent on the issue. It looks as though it is having difficulty balancing the bank’s public service responsibility to people living in remote places with the need to get the bank into healthy profit so it can recoup the

taxpayer's bail-out money.



Robbie Drummond, Managing Director CalMac Ferries Limited appears before the Rural Economy and Connectivity Committee to give evidence on Ferry services in Scotland. 30 May 2018. Pic – Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

Another state-owned company was in trouble this week.... over its ferry services in the Western Isles. Caledonian MacBrayne has had to “adjust” its timetables because its big ferry running out of Oban, the 20-year old MV Clansman, has been undergoing repairs for the last two months. The managing director, Robbie Drummond, apologised to passengers in front of a committee at the Scottish Parliament. He explained that his efforts to find a replacement ship over the last two years had been unsuccessful and two new ferries being built on the Clyde had been delayed.

There is growing demand for the ferries. Traffic has increased by 37 per cent in the last five years. It's a sign of the revival of Scotland's 93 inhabited islands where over 100,000 people now live. This week the Scottish Parliament approved an Islands Bill which gives island councils more powers and funding for matters such as marine licensing,

housing, schools, ferries and broadband.

Of course, no man is an island entire of itself, so we have all been mourning the early death of Neale Cooper (54), one of the "Gothenburg Greats", the Aberdeen football team which won the European Cup Winner's Cup in 1983. He collapsed at his home in Aberdeen on Monday. Tributes have been paid to him as a player, a manager (Peterhead and Ross County) and an all-round lively character.

He was a reminder of Scotland's glory days when we were playing in, and not just watching, the World Cup. We were once able to beat Peru who demolished us 2-0 on Wednesday in the summer friendlies. And I daren't imagine what will happen on Sunday in Mexico.

Never send to know for whom the whistle blows, it blows for thee.