

Letter from Scotland



Blowing in the wind

As I write, a strong westerly wind is blowing around my house, Storm Hector they are calling it. The birch tree outside is bending wildly and the big sycamores are heaving and rustling like bustling grannies in summer dresses. Ferries, trains and roads have been disrupted with winds of up to 70 mph. But it is a warm wind and, one feels, it's good tempered.

Unlike our political storm this week. On Wednesday the SNP walked out of the Westminster parliament in the biggest

protest for years. They said they were fed up with Scotland being “ignored” in the whole Brexit process. All 34 of the party’s MPs followed their leader Ian Blackford out of the Commons chamber when he was expelled by the Speaker. He was insisting on an emergency debate on the government’s refusal to give time for the Scottish element of the EU Withdrawal Bill to be considered by MPs.

The other parties said it was cheap stunt. But it worked. The next day the Speaker conceded a debate – to be held on Monday – and the SNP said they’d gained 5,000 new members as news of the protest spread. There was a blue flag demonstration by SNP supporters outside the Scottish Parliament on Thursday. Nicola Sturgeon said it would no longer be “business as usual” with Westminster and there’s talk of more protest action in the future.

The row is over what the SNP say is a “power grab” by Westminster as responsibilities return to the UK when (and if) we leave the European Union. Some 150 of these responsibilities are currently exercised by the Scottish Parliament but a crucial 24 are being retained by Westminster...for reasons we don’t really know. But the suspicion is that UK ministers want to force lower “international” standards on Scottish food, agriculture and fishing as part of the Britain-goes-it-alone agenda after Brexit.

There’s also a constitutional point at stake. The UK Secretary of State for Scotland, David Mundell, insists that the Scottish Parliament is only a devolved parliament and Westminster can exercise sovereignty over it when it wants. So the fact that the majority of MSPs at Holyrood are against the EU Withdrawal Bill has no legal force. It does however have a political force. And this could suddenly develop into a mighty wind of change and result in the end of the United Kingdom.



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PROCESSIONS in Edinburgh June 10th 2018

A reminder of another wind of change blew along Princes Street in Edinburgh last Sunday when thousands of women decked out in the Suffragette colours – green, white and purple – gathered to celebrate the 100th anniversary of votes for women. And what a wind of change that signaled, after thousands of years of male domination. Sudden we men discovered that “equality” didn’t just apply to income or colour of skin or religion but to half the population. And most of Africa, the Middle East

and Asia, (and the world's boardrooms) have still not come to terms with the change.



Piper Louise Marshall leads PROCESSIONS 2018 in Edinburgh

One result of that change is that fewer babies are being born in Scotland. In the year to March, the number reached a 15 year low, with only 52,322 babies being born. The number of people who died in the same period was 59,943. So you see why the Scottish government is keen to attract young, working age migrants to halt the population decline and pay for the services needed by the increasing number of old folk like me.

Even the babies we have are not going to get the services they require, according to a report out this week from the National Day-Care and Nursery Association. They say the government will be unable to deliver its promised 1,140 hours per year of state-provided nursery care because nearly half of private nurseries just can't afford to provide places for the subsidies on offer. Already the government has had to fork out another £150m a year to fund its child-care programme and it's just hoping that tax revenues from mothers being able to work will eventually fill the funding gap.

I can't leave the week behind without praising one young man

from Ardnamurchan, the most westerly point of mainland Britain. Innes Ferguson's father runs the famous lighthouse visitor centre there and Innes (16) was so appalled at the amount of plastic rubbish being washed up on the shore that he has begun a sponsored clean-up. Storm Hector is no doubt adding to his work with a fair proportion of the 12.5m tonnes of plastic we throw in the world's oceans each year washing up on his shore. It's another issue only just coming to our attention.

Thank goodness for sport, to take our minds off our real-life problems. The Men's World Cup might be a Russian fantasy for Scotland but we can rejoice in our women's national team doing well, maybe even qualifying for the Women's World Cup. They beat Poland 3-2 on Tuesday.



Calum McLeod celebrates his century Photo
Nigel Duncan Media

And then there's the cricket, the men's cricket. They beat England in a one-day international in Edinburgh on Sunday. That has sent a shock wave across both sides of the border.

So the times they are a-changing and the answer to it all is blowing in the wind.

