

Letter from Scotland



Three tough tests for Scotland

Despite the holidays, these are testing times.....in school, on the race track and at the Festival. For those hoping to get enough good grades to go to university or to win medals at the European Championships or to impress the reviewers, it must have been an anxious week. For those of us watching from the sidelines, it's been thrilling. Knowing for sure that I could never do any of these things, gives me a feeling of gay abandon.



Deputy First Minister John Swinney with S5 and S6 pupils from Firrhill High School

On Tuesday, 135,000 school pupils got their exam results. These were National 5 exams, Highers and Advanced Highers for 15 -18 year olds. With an overall pass rate of over 75 per cent, the education secretary John Swinney said it had been “a really great achievement” for pupils, teachers and, of course, the government.

However, the further the opposition parties dug down into the figures, the more they found to criticise. The pass rate in the Highers was down from 77 per cent to 76.8 per cent, which might not look like much, but this is the third year of a fall in the figure. And there has been no improvement in the science subjects which are supposed to be specially targeted. The critics say it’s not unconnected with a £400m fall in the funding for schools over the last ten years of austerity.

The good news is that the number of Scottish pupils getting into university has risen by 4 per cent to 28,970 and the

number from poor backgrounds has also improved. So I suppose all those pictures of pupils jumping in the air are justified. (Mr Swinney's jump was less convincing – I don't think his feet actually left the ground.)

Meanwhile testing of a different kind has been going on in Glasgow, and other venues, in the European Sports Championships. Edinburgh girl Grace Reid won a silver medal in the diving. Glasgow boy Duncan Scott won three medals in the swimming. We didn't do so well in the cycling – which seems to be dominated by the Dutch and the Belgians. But the Scottish golfer Catriona Matthew is playing well in the golf at Gleneagles. And in the athletics in Berlin, Scottish runners Eilidh Doyle and Lynsey Sharp both got through to their finals.

There's been some parochial debate over the disruption to normal life which the Games have inevitably brought with them. Roads have been sealed off for the cycling events. There's been traffic hold-ups because of the rowing in Strathclyde Park. Glasgow has been hosting 4,500 athletes from 50 different countries – not to mention all their supporters and general spectators. And the question some Glaswegian have been asking is: is the inconvenience worth it, in order to put the city and the rest of Scotland on the map for large events like Games or Festivals ?



A crowded Festival

Edinburgh folk have even more reason to ask if their city has become unpleasantly over-crowded. There's talk of a ban on new hotels being built in the city centre and further pedestrianisation of the main streets. And, more urgently, of a tourist tax to help pay for the extra services the city council needs to provide.

The prime minister joined the throng briefly on Tuesday. Theresa May was in Edinburgh to sign a "city deal" with Nicola Sturgeon and the leader of the city council Adam McVey. The UK government and Scottish government are each committing £300m towards various building projects over the next few years – including housing, transport and a new concert hall. Mrs May also announced that two of the UK's new science centres are to be in Scotland, in Glasgow and Dundee.



The Prime Minister Theresa May arrives in Edinburgh

Did this do anything to smooth the choppy waters between Mrs May and Ms Sturgeon over Brexit ? Clearly not. Because after a no-doubt polite private conversation on the issue, Ms Sturgeon came out saying the UK government should be developing a “plan B”, in case its negotiation with the European Union fails to win a new trade deal. And that plan B must surely be to stay in the Single Market and Customs Union, something Mrs May has repeatedly ruled out.

Finally, it's been a testing time for red squirrels living in the woods near Shieldaig in Wester Ross. In addition to the usual threat from grey squirrels, many of them were being killed on the A896 road. Now however the conservation charity Trees for Life has installed a rope bridge over the road and their wildlife officer says his hidden camera has found that the squirrels have learnt to use it. No dead squirrels have been found on the road so far this year.

So, testing times for politicians, athletes and school

leavers. Hard work and patience is required. But the red squirrels of Shieldaig know that you only have to cross a bridge when you come to it.