

Letter from Scotland



Still learning to re-cycle

Householders in my part of Edinburgh have just been issued with our new bin collection calendar, a pattern of dates and coloured bin-shapes as exciting as the Periodic Table. The city council says it will empty our bins on Fridays, our food waste every week, our recyclables and general rubbish every second week and, if we pay an extra charge, we can have our garden waste collected every second Thursday. (The charge is £25 per household per annum)

By happy coincidence this is national Recycling Week and Scotland is celebrating reaching an important “tipping point”, recycling more domestic waste than we send to landfill. But we are still burying over a million tonnes of rubbish in holes in the ground, the equivalent to a tonne of CO₂ for every person every year.

Our recycling habits are slowly improving and we are now half way to our target of recycling 75 per cent of household rubbish by 2025. Some councils are better than others. East

Renfrewshire, for instance, recycles 67 per cent of its rubbish but Shetland only 8 per cent. Edinburgh and Aberdeen recycle over 40 per cent, but Glasgow only 27 per cent. And there is still a lot of simple recycling we are not doing – like disposing of 30,000 tonnes of plastic bottles in landfill every year.

The government, of course, is always urging us householder to recycle (and it is trying to set up a plastic bottle return scheme) but what it is not so good at is urging manufacturers to produce less plastic in the first place. It could be taxing plastic wrappings but not paper wrappings or charging firms for the pollution they cause through their careless customers or customers who are not given a choice. But hey, what does the future of the planet matter when there are voters to please.

It's party conference season and Labour have been telling us they'll end austerity, reform the economy and vote against a no-deal Brexit. The Conservatives will be laying out the Theresa May Brexit plan next week and hoping it will be received politely on all sides. Scotland doesn't get much of a mention at these UK conferences but the SNP conference is being held the week after next and no doubt we will hear a great deal about Scotland then. It's worth noting however, that with Labour edging towards a second referendum on Brexit, the pressure is growing on the SNP leadership to join the call for a so-called "people's vote."

Being the party of government however, the SNP is facing the real life challenges of Scotland, several of which were exposed this week. Reported crime is up for the first time in 11 years. Disturbingly, the sharpest rises have been in violent crime and sexual offences. At the same time, the "clear-up" rate has fallen and there are concerns about police morale. Maybe that's why the justice secretary announced a 6 per cent pay rise for police officers, well above the rate offered to other public sector staff.

The 35 year rise in life expectancy has come to a halt. Scots men can expect to live to be 77 and women 81, a shorter life than in England, and on a par with Estonia, Lithuania and Poland. The causes seem to be diet-related illnesses and a rise in dementia. A particularly virulent strain of flu may also have played a part and the NHS was certainly under strain last winter with the number of elderly flu patients being admitted to hospital.

Understandably doctors and nurses came under pressure. And so did the NHS management, judging by the number of complaints of bullying and intimidation which have emerged over recent weeks in the Highlands, Tayside and Lothian. Staff say that "whistle-blowers" are punished instead of welcomed and one union leader has talked of a "culture of fear" in the NHS.

Then there's trouble on the ferries. Bosses at Caledonian MacBrayne told MSPs this week that they've reached the end of their tether. They've been underfunded for the last decade. When they should have been spending £50m a year on new vessels and harbour improvements, they've only been given £25m, and this at a time when passenger numbers have increased by a third.

Oh dear, who'd want to be First Minister? But Nicola Sturgeon always seems to be cheerful. There she was at Hampden on Wednesday kicking the ball about with Scotland's Ladies football team. She's just found them an extra £80,000 to help part-timers train full time for next summer's World Cup.

And while we're talking about Hampden, I see it is to be used twice on the same day for the semi-finals of the men's League Cup. Aberdeen will play Rangers at noon on 28 October and at 7.45pm that same day, Hearts will play Celtic. The well-worn stadium, which we learned only last week is to be acquired for the nation, is being made to work hard for its new status.

Maybe a pop concert could be squeezed in on the same night. If

Kylie Minogue enjoys her Glasgow experience at the Hydro this weekend, she might come back in October. Not that she's recycling anything. She has a slate of new songs on her "Golden" album, as I'm sure you know.