

Letter from Scotland



Bike it and like it Photo John Knox

Here in Edinburgh we are only just getting used to seeing racks of bikes for hire. Just Eat Cycles have only appeared in the last month and, so far, only 19 bike stations have been established. But we are catching up with Glasgow and its 500 bikes and 62 stations. And London where Boris Bikes are parked at 800 stations and Paris where 20,000 Vélib bikes operate from 1,800 stations.

Despite the hills, Edinburgh is already pretty good at cycling. Over 7 per cent of daily journeys to work or school are done by bike and 9 per cent of the population cycle at least once a week. That compares with less than 2 per cent in the rest of Scotland but it's still a long way behind the likes of Cambridge (29 per cent) or Amsterdam (60 per cent).

This week there's been a new development. The Scottish Government has announced it will provide 239 electric bikes to organisations such as housing associations, colleges, community groups throughout Scotland to encourage less active people to get moving, quietly and cheaply....and speedily. I am constantly being overtaken by elderly cyclists on steep up-hills, my self-esteem only restored when I see the hefty cog on the back wheel and the battery pack.

I can't see the point of electric bikes myself. The whole purpose of cycling is to get some exercise and save the environment. But I suppose electric bikes are better than cars or buses. And we are moving towards a more "electric age." The Scottish Government wants to phase out petrol and diesel cars by 2040 and has committed itself to providing a network of electric charge points. In Edinburgh, councillors are planning an extra 200 in the next five years.

Batteries too are getting better. Next week a battery powered train is to go on trial on the Bo'ness and Kinneil railway in West Lothian. Apparently it can travel at up to 60mph for 40 miles and the batteries only take four minutes to recharge.



Ruth Davidson and Theresa May during campaigning in 2017 at a warehouse owned by

removal firm Clockwork in Granton

If only our political machinery could be recharged as quickly. It's holiday time and conference season for all the parties. We've just seen the Conservatives fall apart over Brexit, the Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson issuing one final and forlorn plea for unity before she went off on maternity leave.

Labour couldn't quite decide on whether it wants a "peoples vote" on Brexit or not. And this week we saw further evidence of a left-right split in the Scottish Labour Party, with the Corbynite leader Richard Leonard dismissing two centre-right colleagues from his shadow cabinet.



Nicola Sturgeon speaking at the 2015 SNP Manifesto launch

Which leaves the SNP still standing and meeting for their conference in Glasgow this weekend. Perhaps that's why there was news on Thursday that NHS boards are to have their debts written off to give them more funds to tackle the mounting pressures on the health service.

No doubt we'll hear more announcements on what the SNP intends to do about prison over-crowding. The prison population is at a four-year high, with a 40 per cent rise in prisoners held on remand. We may hear more on tackling child poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation warned this week that lack of affordable child-care, and the cuts in disability payments, have led to a quarter of all children living in poverty.

Of course, Westminster "austerity" will be blamed for many of the problems and Nicola Sturgeon will come under further pressure to go for a second independence referendum in order to end austerity and escape from Brexit. She had planned to outline her strategy this weekend when "the terms of Brexit become clear". But, of course, they are far from clear, so Ms Sturgeon is left treading water and an increasingly hot bowl of porridge.

At least one of the nation's problems has been solved this week – where to play the League Cup semi-finals. We're talking about men's football, where nothing seems easy.

Last week the Scottish Football Association decided to play the Aberdeen-Rangers game at Hampden at noon on Sunday 28th October and the [Hearts- Celtic game](#) in the same stadium at 7.45pm on the same day. The SFA, it seems, forgot to look at the train timetables or have a word with the police or the clubs or the fans. The resulting outrage could only be quietened by an humiliating pass-back. So the Hearts-Celtic game will take place at Murrayfield in Edinburgh and both games will start at sensible times in the afternoon.

Finally, I can report that Scotland has not lost its spirit of adventure. Duncan Hutchison has just been rescued from his 7m rowing boat, 800 miles out in the Atlantic. He'd set out from New York 100 days before with the aim of rowing single-handed, in his self-built boat, 3,000 miles to his home in Lochinver. Alas, the electric instruments on his boat failed and he had to be picked up by a passing tanker. "I just wanted to show

that ordinary people could do unusual things," he said afterwards. And he's raised £20,000 for the third world charity Water Aid.

Back in June, another Highlander Niall Ian Macdonald also tried to row single-handed from New York to his home in Stornoway when he was struck by a huge wave and had to be rescued by the Dutch cargo ship. He'd done about a quarter of the journey. It was his third attempt.

We may not be much good at organising our football or our politics or cycling to work, but we are still producing people like Duncan Hutchison and Niall Iain Macdonald.