

Letter from Scotland

In a valiant effort to be cheerful this weekend, we are celebrating St Andrew's Day and the Advent of Christmas.

But in truth, we have little to be cheerful about.

Storm Diana has been battering and soaking us for the last two days. It's been unusually dark. We are trying to celebrate, with a torchlight parade in Glasgow, a brightly lit Big Wheel in Edinburgh and a government campaign urging us to consider "a small act of kindness to make someone's day."

But St Andrew himself is not doing us any favours.



He's big in Bulgaria. St Andrew by 19th c Bulgarian artist Yoan Gabrova

We had actually forgotten about St Andrew's Day for several centuries until, in 1729 a group of American-Scots in South Carolina decided to revive the traditional feast day. Nowadays, it's celebrated across the world, in unlikely places

like Russia and Greece and Bulgaria.

In Bulgaria, St Andrew is supposed to have fought with a bear and harnessed him to his plough.

Here in Scotland, St Andrew is remembered as a fisherman in the Sea of Galilee. And thereby hangs a tale because it might explain why fishing has become such a totemic issue in the whole Brexit debate.

The 13 Conservative MPs from Scotland say they won't support Theresa May's Brexit deal because it doesn't make clear that foreign boats will not be allowed in UK waters after 2020.

Mrs May, on her three-hour trip to Scotland on Wednesday, tried to reassure us that her deal was the best available and that we should all get behind it and end the whole tiresome business of EU negotiations. Unfortunately her tour was spoiled by an unhelpful load of figures from the Treasury, the Bank of England and the Scottish Government, all showing that Brexit, in whatever form, will be bad for the economy.

The Scottish figures suggest that Mrs May's deal will leave us 6 per cent worse off by 2030, that's £9bn a year, or £1,600 per person. The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said no Scottish government with the country's interests at heart could possibly accept it. And she went on to make the case for a compromise – keeping the UK in the Customs Union and the Single Market.

With Storm Diana blowing about our ears, we got another warning this week of the likely effects of climate change. Government forecasts suggest Scottish summers will be 4 degrees warmer by 2070 and the winters 40 per cent wetter. There will be more droughts and more flooding. Sea levels will rise by up to a metre.

The Scottish Government says we've already cut greenhouse gases by 50 per cent since 1990 and it's set a world-beating

target to reduce them by 90 per cent by 2050. Not to be outdone, we learnt this week that the UK government has revived its carbon-capture programme, albeit vastly reduced from £1bn to just £175,000. However it's hoped this funding will be matched by others and it will allow work to resume on the carbon-capture project at the St Fergus gas-fired power station near Peterhead.

Meanwhile we are continuing to pollute our seas. The latest report from the Marine Conservation Society says the amount of rubbish collected by its 2,900 volunteers from Scottish beaches rose by a sixth last year. An average of 559 items were found on every 100 metres of beach, everything from plastic bottles and drinks cans to cotton buds and wipes and tiny pieces of polystyrene. The MCS is urging the government to improve the sewage system and introduce a plastic bottle deposit-and-return scheme. But, of course, the big solution lies with ourselves.

We had a reminder this week of another depressing fact – Scotland has the worst death rate from drug misuse in the whole of the EU. 934 people died last year, the largest number since records began. It has prompted the government to change course and, instead of tackling drug misuse as a criminal matter, it is in future to be seen as a health issue. The public health minister Joe FitzPatrick said his new strategy will be to address underlying problems such as homelessness, unemployment, and lack of education about the dangers of drugs.

This would be a good week to escape the earthly realm. So I was intrigued to learn that the UK Space Agency has put forward plans for a "Spaceport" on the A'Mhoine peninsula on the north coast of Scotland between Tongue and Durness. However, it transpires this would not be for passenger flights to Mars but for launching yet more mini-satellites into Earth orbit. The plans also face considerable opposition from local crofters and, presumably the local white-tailed eagles. But

then a six month journey on a rocket to Mars is perhaps not so enticing as it first seems.

And anyway, the Martians have trashed their planet just as we are trashing ours.

Our photo above shows Ben Macpherson Minister for Europe, Migration and International Development with Jordi Albareda who began the Fair Saturday movement in Bilbao and who visited Edinburgh recently. The instrumentalists are from the Nevis Ensemble and they had just done something nice by playing a few tunes for passengers on an Edinburgh Tram.

It is a big deal that Scotland is the first country to celebrate in this way. [Read more here.](#)