

Letter from Scotland

It's scary watching the Battle of Brexit unfold, especially from north of the border. We cannot have much influence on the result and yet the consequences for us are huge. Not just for our economy but for our future in the so-called United Kingdom.



Avoiding a cliff-edge Brexit (St Abbs Head)

We've watched with some glee as Theresa May's deal was defeated by 230 votes and then, with astonishment, as her party suddenly pulled together to keep her in office. Now she's had the audacity to invite all parties to talks about the way forward. You've got to admire her persistence.

The SNP's leader at Westminster Ian Blackford went into the talks insisting that a no-deal Brexit

be taken off the table and the idea of a second referendum be seriously considered. The Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn won't even go into the talks until a no-deal Brexit is ruled out.

It's not easy to see how any compromise will emerge, even the SNP's compromise of remaining in the European Customs Union and the Single Market. Nicola Sturgeon flew down to London the morning after the "meaningful vote" against Mrs May's deal to insist that a second referendum has never been more likely. And as for a second referendum on Scottish independence, Ms Sturgeon said she would be making an announcement about that in "the next few weeks."

At question time in the Scottish Parliament, the Conservatives and Labour tried to divert attention from Brexit altogether. They returned to the way Ms Sturgeon was handling the allegations of sexual harassment being leveled at her predecessor Alex Salmond. The Green Party leader Patrick Harvey, quite rightly, rebuked them for ducking the biggest issue of the day. And Ms Sturgeon said both parties were trying to hide their own internal divisions over Brexit.

Meanwhile, more strains on the Scottish Government's budget appeared this week. The main teachers union is balloting on strike action over pay. College lecturers held a one day strike, again over pay. More than half of all care homes reported unfilled staff vacancies – partly due to low pay. And Councils are complaining of a 3.4 per cent reduction in their grants for existing core services. One council, Glasgow City, is having to mortgage some of its buildings to fund an expected pay-out of £500m to its women workers for past under-payment.

In the private economy, there were more signs of weakness. The Stoneywood paper mill in Aberdeen has been put into administration by its French owners. The mill has been in operation for 250 years. Over 480 jobs are now in jeopardy. And after a 1.2 per cent fall in Christmas sales, the retail industry is warning of low spending throughout 2019. It blames inflation, rising household costs and uncertainty over Brexit.

Never mind ! We can still go fishing. The salmon season opened this week on the River Tay. The procession of rods, green jackets and peaked caps was led to the riverbank by the adventurer Polly Murray, the first Scottish woman to climb Mt Everest. But actually they won't be catching many fish this year. Stocks are down and nine out of ten salmon caught have to be returned to the river.

Well, if the tourists don't come for the fishing any more, they are certainly coming for the film locations. There seems to be no end to "Scottish" films promoting our glens and castles to a world-wide cinema audience. Think what Braveheart, The Da Vinci Code, Harry Potter, Outlander, The Avengers, Outlaw King, have done for our hotels and coach companies. The sheer production of such films brought in £100m to the Scottish economy in 2017, according to the agency Creative Scotland. Hence the plans for film studios in Leith and Dalkeith.



Saoirse Ronan and other members of the cast with the First Minister at Edinburgh Castle on Monday night

The latest film being used

for tourism purposes is Mary Queen of Scots.

The tourist agency Visit Scotland has published a map of 19 places

connected with the real Mary Queen of Scots, plus another 6 places where parts

of the film were shot, including Blackness Castle in West Lothian, Seacliff

beach in East Lothian, Glen Coe and Glen Feshie.

The other film of the moment

is The Favourite, about another Queen of Scotland, the unattractive Queen

Anne. It was under her reign that

Scotland gave up its independence in 1707.

I wonder if this Brexit business will mean Scotland will become

independent again under Queen Elizabeth and 300 years from now someone will be

making a film about it.