

# Letter from Scotland

Winter has finally arrived.

Admittedly not the “polar vortex ” bringing show storms and temperatures of minus 30 C to parts of the United States but it’s still been pretty cold by our standards. Braemar was down to minus 14 C

and snow has blanketed the hills and blocked a few high roads in the Highlands.

Elsewhere there’s been a sharp frost, followed by cold sunny days.



A frosty shadow lies across our pitch, even at mid-day. We are caught too in a Brexit freeze while Theresa May skates over to Brussels to see if there's any chance of re-negotiating the Northern Irish "backstop" in her EU withdrawal plan. The SNP's 35 MPs spent all of Tuesday evening trooping through the division lobby at Westminster voting against a no-deal Brexit, successfully, but then unsuccessfully voting for an extension to the leaving deadline and a second referendum. Their leader Ian Blackford said Scotland was "scunnered" and accused the prime minister of "ripping up the Good Friday agreement" which has brought peace, of a sort, to Northern Ireland.



Derek Mackay MSP, Cabinet Secretary for Finance, Economy and Fair Work speaking in the chamber of the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh during the debate on the Scottish Government's draft spending and tax plans for 2019-20. 12 December 2018. Pic – Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

We were caught too in a budget freeze, as it appeared, till the very last moment, that the SNP minority government would not get its budget through the Scottish Parliament. However, the 6 Green MSPs obligingly sledged in with their support, in exchange for more money for local councils (£90m more) and a promise to hold all-party talks on local government finance in the future. In addition the Greens managed to persuade the government to allow councils to increase local council tax by up to 4.8 per cent, and introduce a tourist tax and a

workplace car parking charge, if they wish.

Overall, the Scottish government budget stands at £34 billion. The SNP say Westminster austerity has meant a £340m real-terms cut in its revenue grant but they have mitigated this with £271m raised in extra taxes in Scotland. This has allowed them, they say, to make real-terms increases in the health and care budget and in education.

Of course, our prospects would look much better if we had more revenue from "Scotland's oil". And this week, we got a whiff of new wealth with the news that another large oil/gas field has been discovered in the North Sea. It's estimated that the Glengorm field, east of Aberdeen, could yield up to 250m barrels of oil-equivalent, the largest find for over a decade. But there are several problems. It will be expensive to produce, it's owned by a Chinese company, the tax revenue goes to the Westminster government not the Scottish government and we really should be leaving the stuff in the ground if we are serious about preventing climate change.

Meanwhile back in the real world, there's been another high-profile case of hospital infection. Last week we learnt of a child's death at the new Queen Elizabeth Hospital in Glasgow due to an infection caused by pigeon droppings in the water supply. This week, two premature babies died in the Princess Royal Maternity Hospital in Glasgow from a blood infection. Questions have been asked in parliament about the infection control regimes at both hospitals and whether the health board is skimping on maintenance and cleaning staff.

Scot Rail managers will be hoping that the winter snows will not cause as much disruption as the autumn winds. A rail-

users survey published this week shows passenger satisfaction at a 16 year low (79 per cent), mainly because of cancelled commuter trains last autumn. New, larger trains are coming on stream slowly but there's still a shortage of staff and Scot Rail still has to solve the issue of poor information for passengers.

At least most of its trains are running, unlike the Cairngorm mountain railway which has been closed until further notice. Engineers have found serious weaknesses in the piers which hold the rail line up and in the bearings of the carriages. It's a bitter blow to the tourist industry in Speyside during the ski season and in the summer.



One of the young Shetlanders in Edinburgh for the Torchlight Procession in 2017

Some brave tourists made it to Shetland on Tuesday evening to watch the final act of the Up Helly Aa celebrations. Despite a layer of snow and a chilly wind, they saw a thousand or so "Norsemen" raise their battle axes and flaming torches in the air and set fire to their longboat, burning up the evils of the past year and hoping for a better one to come.

And at the other end of the country, the folk music festival Celtic Connections has been fiddling away in Glasgow. Two weeks of events – 300 of them – are coming to an end this weekend with a final get-together in the Art School. By all accounts it's been another rollocking success with a Lanarkshire fiddler Benedict Morris winning the title of Young Traditional Musician of the Year.

One man who is out in the cold this week is the Hibernian Football Club coach Neil Lennon. He was suspended last Friday after "warm words" were apparently spoken in the dressing room and later it was announced he was leaving by mutual consent. It seems a pity since he'd only been with the club two years. He'd taken them back into the top league and only lost 25 of his 123 matches.

Who'd be a football manager these days, or a prime minister, or in charge of anything ? Welcome to the fickle world of 2019.