

Letter from Scotland

We have been enjoying the warmest February day for over 120 years. (18.3C in Aboyne). A week of mild weather has lulled into thinking the winter of our discontent is over. The birds are singing in the hedgerows.



Snowdrops on the banks of the Tweed tempting us into a false sense of spring.

Down on the River Tweed, I watched a pair of goosanders, in their bright spring colours, prospecting for a nest site. Here in Edinburgh the herons are sitting expectantly in their tree-nests at Duddingston Loch. But I have a feeling we are all in for a shock, in many ways.

Just when we thought there would be a week's lull in the civil war over Brexit, both main parties began to fall apart. First, seven Labour MPs left the party, then eight. Then three

Conservatives joined the “independent group.” Who knows how many there might be by the time you read this.

So far, the fissures have not reached Scotland, though there are several Conservative MPs who are appalled at the prospect of a no-deal Brexit – among them the Scottish Secretary David Mundell and the leader Ruth Davidson who in the past have threatened to resign if a no-deal Brexit is not taken off the table. On the Labour side, the leading anti-Brexit MP Ian Murray has said he’s staying in the party to fight for a second EU referendum, but he’s refused to sign any proposed pledge of loyalty.

The SNP government meanwhile has been adding to the atmosphere of impending catastrophe. Its economic advisors have published a report suggesting that a no-deal Brexit could lose Scotland up to 7 per cent of its annual income. Depending on how awful a withdrawal from the EU might be, they say exports would fall between 10 and 20 per cent, investment worth up to £1bn might be lost, unemployment would rise to between 5 and 8 per cent, leaving 100,000 people out of work.

The Finance Minister Derek Mackay, says he will try to shelter Scotland from the storm but, as he rightly says, Scotland’s devolved parliament has limited powers. His budget, finally approved by MSPs on Thursday, includes increased funds for health, education and infrastructure, but no real-terms increase in core spending for local councils. Instead councils have been allowed to increase local tax by up to 4.75 per cent. Many smaller councils are choosing to do so, but not Glasgow or Edinburgh or Aberdeen who are sticking to the same increase as last year, 3 per cent.

On Wednesday, Mr Mackay also won parliament’s support for his decision not to pass on the Chancellor’s increase in the tax threshold for higher earners. That will bring in an extra £68m in tax revenue. The Conservatives argued it will lead to a flight of talented workers to lower-taxed England, though I

have yet to hear of anyone leaving Scotland for that reason.

All week we've been following the harrowing details a court trial involving the rape and murder of a six year old girl by a 16 year old boy. Alesha MacPhail went missing from her grandparents' home in Rothsay while she was on holiday there last July. Her body was found a few days later in woods nearby. She had suffered 117 wounds. The boy, who cannot be named because he is still a child himself, was in dispute with Alesha's father over a drug deal. The judge said it was one of the most wicked crimes the court had ever had to deal with.

For the past year, Scotland's school teachers have been campaigning for a substantial pay rise to make up for the years of austerity. They want a 10 per cent rise now but their immediate employers, the local councils, have only offered a 9 per cent rise, with a further 3 per cent next year. The Scottish government says it's the best offer in the public sector anywhere in Britain. And this week it was accepted by the smaller teachers' union the SSTA. But members of the largest union, the EIS have voted to reject the offer. However the margin was fairly close, 57 per cent to 43 per cent, so I guess we are heading towards a solution.



Richardson owl

Finally, a rare Richardson owl has appeared in Shetland, a long way from its usual home in the taiga forests of North America and Europe. It's the first time it's been seen in Shetland for over 100 years. It gets its name from the Scottish naturalist and arctic explorer Sir John Richardson who first encountered the bird in northern Canada. Apparently this little owl, with his white eye-surrounds always looks surprised, as well he might, landing in tree light Shetland in the middle of a heat-wave.