

Letter from Scotland

There was some snow left on the top of Cairngorm and a chilly wind but the ski tows had just stopped running and men on snowmobiles were collecting the slalom poles.

As we made our way down the mountain we could feel the seasons change. The next day, Maundy Thursday, the weather suddenly turned mild and Scotland had its warmest Easter on record (23 degrees Celsius).

It's been a poor winter for ski-ing in Scotland. The five resorts were only open for 30 days out of a possible 140. The number of "skier days" was down to 9,500, compared to over 200,000 in 2013 and 2014. Last year was even worse. Our other big tourist attraction, salmon fishing, is also suffering the effects of climate change. Wild salmon catches in 2018 were down to below 40,000 for the first time since records began in 1952.



Winter is over, the spring offensive begins.
Climate change campaigners over
the Easter holidays – in London and Edinburgh – had plenty of
examples to point
to here at home and not just in the flood plains of Africa or
the melting ice
fields of the Arctic.



Extinction Rebellion protesters in Edinburgh earlier in April
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But with the coming of
spring, the SNP are launching a new campaign for
independence. It started with a statement in parliament
from Nicola Sturgeon on Wednesday when she announced plans for
a second
referendum on independence before the next Holyrood elections
in 2021.



First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP makes a statement to the Scottish parliament announcing her ministerial statement on Brexit and Scotland's Future. 24 April 2019 . Pic – Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

“A choice between Brexit and a future for Scotland as an independent European nation should be offered in the lifetime of this parliament,” she told MSPs. “If Scotland is taken out of the EU, the option of a referendum on independence within that timescale must be open to us.”

There will be legislation put before the Scottish parliament by the end of this year to prepare for such a referendum – though that will require the agreement of Westminster. The first minister also offered talks with the opposition parties on ways to bring more powers to the Scottish parliament and she announced a “Citizens’ Assembly” to debate the future

of the
country.

All this is not unrelated to the SNP's spring conference being held this weekend in Edinburgh. Party activists are said to be growing impatient for another referendum sooner rather than later. A new "Yes" campaign is being launched and a new "Voices for Scotland" organisation will try to win over wavering voters from other parties and from none.

Of course, the spring offensive may evaporate if Brexit doesn't go ahead or a second EU referendum is called. Or if the SNP doesn't get bogged down in internal struggles over what currency an independent Scotland should have or what sort of economic growth policy it should adopt. So much is up in the fresh spring air.

One thing the SNP could have done without this week was the court case involving one of their former MPs , Natalie McGarry. She pleaded guilty to embezzling more than £25,000 from pro-independence groups, including Women for Independence, of which she was treasurer in the run-up to the 2014 referendum.

Another shocking court case ended this week with the conviction of six men for attempted murder. They were part of the so-called "Lyons" gang who carried out a series of attacks on members of the rival "Daniel" gang. The attacks involved the use of hammers, swords, machetes and car-rammings. The judge told them they had tried to turn Glasgow into a war zone for their own gangster feud.

Flags flew at half mast across the Highlands when news emerged that the bomb attacks in Sri Lanka had claimed the lives of three of the four children of Anders and Anne Povlsen. The Danish fashion billionaires own a dozen Highland estates, including Glen Feshie, and are noted for their commitment to conservation. The family were on holiday in Sri Lanka when their hotel was caught up in the bombing campaign. The Scots church in Colombo, St Andrew's, had a narrow escape. The congregation were in the middle of their Easter service when a bomb exploded in a hotel next door.

Flags also flew at half mast at Celtic Park this week when it was announced that its old champion Billy McNeill had died at the age of 79. As captain, he led the club to its famous European Cup victory in 1967. He went on to have a glittering career as a manager both at Celtic and at Aberdeen, Manchester City and Aston Villa. Among the tributes was one from Sir Alex Ferguson who said Billy was "a giant of Scottish football."

This spring we need to think how to grow more giants.