

# Letter from Scotland

We have been delving into devolution this week. It's 20 years since the first elections to the new Scottish Parliament. It seems a world away now. But as Sergeant Pepper said of his Lonely Hearts Club Band: "They've been going in and out of style, but they're guaranteed to raise a smile."



Twenty years ago today Sergeant Dewar taught the band to play.  
Photo by Loz Pycock.

Donald Dewar was an unlikely national leader. He was a dour Scottish solicitor whose first speech on being elected an MP at Westminster was about the inefficiency of the potato tax. But, almost single-handed, he persuaded the Labour Party to grant Scotland semi-independent status, the first British experiment in devolution. His only hint of celebration – when the results of the 1997 referendum came

through – was to mutter “satisfactory, I think.”

And I suppose those three words sum up the devolution experience over the last 20 years. We’ve been mulling over the achievements of the Scottish Parliament – free-personal care, free university education, national parks, the smoking ban. And this week we added: lifting the age of criminal responsibility to 12. There have, of course, been embarrassments and controversies – the new building itself, the mini expenses scandals, the churn of party leaders, the failure to solve big problems overnight – poverty, poor health, climate change, and the fundamental issue of whether Scotland should go for complete independence. But progress has been “satisfactory” I think most people would agree.



So far, The Scottish Parliament has played a minor role in the Brexit debate. But that’s not for want of trying. It’s passed

resolutions calling for no Brexit and a second EU referendum and it's pressed for the devolved governments to be involved in the Brexit talks. All to no avail. This week the parties have been launching their European manifestos. In just two weeks' time we'll know the results.

Scotland returns 6 MEPs to Brussels. At present, the SNP have two, Labour two, the Conservatives one and there's one former UKIP member David Coburn. This time, the usual parties have been joined on the hustings by the new Brexit Party, the new Change Party and two independents. [The Greens](#) and the Liberal Democrats are hoping to win at least one seat each but there are so many unpredictables it's hard to guess what the results will be.



Pictured Piper Conner Pratt Edinburgh says hi to Hainan Direct route to Beijing comes into operation. The first ever direct flight between Scotland and China has landed at Edinburgh Airport in a momentous day Scotland's busiest airport. The four-weekly, year-round service with Hainan Airlines to Beijing Capital International Airport is Scotland's first connection to the Far East. It is a major boost for tourism in Scotland and increases business links with the Far East, both of which will benefit the Scottish economy. A piper from the world famous Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo welcomed passengers from Beijing to Scotland before piping them off on

departure. PHOTO Ian Georgeson

This week, the SNP government rather heroically followed through on its declaration last week of a "climate change emergency." It reversed a manifesto promise to cut the air departure tax. The air industry was furious of course and it blamed the sudden change of policy for Hainan Airlines' decision to axe the only direct flights between Scotland and China from September this year.

Another "climate change" decision was to introduce a return scheme for drink bottles and cans. The details have still to be worked out but it will follow the practice of several other countries. A deposit of, say 20p, will be charged on every bottle or can bought but it will be refunded if the item is returned. One estimate says that 140,000 empty bottles and cans will be recycled every day.

A disturbing report came out of the BBC this week which found that police carrying firearms turned out to 5,250 incidents in the last year which did not require their use. The incidents included missing people, car accidents and medical emergencies. The community safety minister Ash Denham said it was not a move towards regular armed police but simply that officers in armed response vehicles were nearest to such incidents at the time. However she did promise a review of the policy by the Police Authority.

Finally, another male bastion is about to fall, the Highland Games. Women are being allowed to compete in these traditionally male competitions. In theory there will be women's races, hammer throwing and caber tossing from this summer onwards. It follows a meeting in Braemar of the Scottish Highland Games Association which has been under pressure to "democratise" from one of its main funders, the government agency Event Scotland.

The Labour MSP Rhoda Grant, who has been campaigning for the change, said: "It's disappointing it's taken so long to reach this point...where women can compete on a level playing field at Highland Games events." Women may be equal but there are not many level playing fields at the Highland Games I've been to.