

Letter from Scotland

The house where JM Barrie found inspiration for “Peter Pan” sits rather awkwardly on a side street in Dumfries. “Moat Brae” is a red sandstone mansion house with a garden which stretches down to the River Nith.

It’s just been restored and opened as a story-telling centre, after an £8m fund-raising campaign led by the actress Joanna Lumley. Apparently the young Barrie played in the garden there with the children of the big house and years later remembered the magical times when Peter Pan took charge of the Lost Boys who “fell out of their pram when the maid wasn’t looking.”



Peter Pan and the Lost Boys

It all reminded me this week of the poor old Labour Party. Their “Neverland” finally came to an end when they woke up on Monday morning to discover they had fallen out of their pram and had won no seats in Scotland in the European Parliamentary elections. They used to have two- out of the six – and indeed they used to be the mighty force in Scottish politics.

At the beginning of the devolution experiment in 1999, Labour had 50 MPs at Westminster, out of the possible 72 and the party controlled half the local councils in Scotland.

It fell as low as one MP in 2015 and has only bounced back to seven in recent times. Labour's fall from grace on Monday was, of course, due to its failure to have a coherent policy on Brexit. The campaign manager in Scotland [Neil Findlay](#) resigned taking the blame for a poor campaign. The party's justice spokesman Daniel Johnson resigned in protest at all the fence-sitting. Whereupon the leader of the Scottish Labour Party Richard Leonard seemed to wake up and smell the coffee. He immediately announced he had changed his mind and was now in favour of a second referendum on EU membership.



Richard Leonard during his campaign to become leader of the party in Scotland

If this sudden “clarification” in Scotland spreads to the party in England, the European elections may well have been the turning point in the whole Brexit affair. With the SNP, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens and now Labour in favour of a second referendum, it looks much more likely it will happen.

And talking of referendums, the SNP this week tabled legislation in The Scottish Parliament laying out how

referendums in general are to be run in Scotland. No date has been set for a second independence referendum, though Nicola Sturgeon says she would like it to be at the end of next year, whether or not Britain leaves the EU.



Christian Allard Alyn Smith and Aileen McLeod are the newly elected SNP MEPs

The SNP are buoyed up by the results of the European elections. They won three of the six seats in Scotland, the others went to the Conservatives, the Liberal Democrats and the Brexit Party. In fact the Brexit Party came second to the SNP, with 14 per cent of the vote, which reminds us there is still a rump of Scottish opinion in favour of leaving the EU.

When MSPs in the Scottish

Parliament were not discussing referendums, they were passing the first stage

of a bill to outlaw “smacking”, the traditional chastisement of children. The

Conservatives voted against, saying it would criminalise parents and was an

unwanted interference in family life. But the children's minister Maree Todd said the intension was not to criminalise parents but allow social workers to support them in bringing up their children without the use of violence.

They say violence breeds violence. And indeed here in the centre of "civilised" Edinburgh a young man was stabbed to death in the street... in broad daylight and just hours before I sat down to write this. It was a shocking reminder of the bad old days.

We had another reminder of Scotland's violent past when the long-running inquiry into historic child abuse published its latest findings. The chairwoman of the inquiry Lady Smith found that four orphanages run by the Sisters of Nazareth from the 1930s to the 1980s were "places of fear, hostility and confusion." Children were regularly abused and degraded in a long list of ways; including beatings, cold baths, being locked in cupboards and force fed. The homes, in Aberdeen, Glasgow, Midlothian and Ayrshire, have long since closed and the Sisters have apologised. As if that was not enough, the inquiry now moves on to consider similar allegations in 17 other institutions.

Animals look after their young better, as we've been seeing on the BBC's Springwatch programme, which this year is being broadcast from the Abernethy estate on Speyside. We've been watching, live, as pied wagtails rear their chicks. Pine martens, capercaille and grebes of various types have been making nightly appearances.

This is the real world, as it should be. And I feel as if for the rest of the week I've been watching Peter Pan's Neverland with Wendy and the Lost Boys and Captain Hook never far away.



Ruth Davidson leader of the Conservatives in Scotland with newly elected Conservative MEP Baroness Nosheena Mobarik