

Letter from Scotland

The fate of the Scottish fishing industry is just one of the worrying aspects of the omnishambles that is Brexit. There is a lot at stake for the 5,000 fishermen and the 8,000 fish processing workers involved, not to mention the traditional fishing villages where they live and work. But the fishing issue is not easy to disentangle.

Last week, for instance, I watched eight large lorries queuing up to load fish from the so-called "Spanish fleet" at Lochinver on the north west coast. I was told they would be driving all the way to Spain with hake and other fish, much in demand in that part of Europe. The "Spanish fleet" consists of large boats, sold to Spanish owners by the so-called "slipper skippers" Scottish fishermen who have retired from the industry and have sold their boats, and the quota that goes with them, for small fortunes. Critically, the boats remain registered in Scotland.



Awaiting the Spanish fishing fleet at Lochinver
So the political myth that
the European Union has allowed Spanish skippers to raid our
fishing grounds is
just that, a myth. Scottish fishermen have sold their birth
right. Taking back
control of our seas will not result in the sale being reversed
and the Spanish
armada going home. In fact, it may all
end up in another fishing war.

We've already had a skirmish
off Shetland this week. Local fishermen
say the number of foreign boats has doubled in the last two
years and there
have been near-misses at sea as skippers manoeuvre against
each other. The
foreign boats are also being accused of dumping their nets as

soon as they become entangled, leading to huge losses of fish and other wildlife.

It's not easy to see how leaving the EU will fix any of these problems, not to mention the underlying problem that our seas are being over-fished and under policed.

The two men fishing for Conservative Party member's votes have not given much thought to this. In fact I get the impression they have not given much thought to their whole manifestos. On Brexit they both think they can renegotiate Mrs May's deal, even though that's been ruled out by the other 27 countries of the EU. They have been promising money to anyone who asks – rich taxpayers, poor taxpayers, corporation tax accountants, farmers and fishermen, manufacturers of unhealthy food, forgotten parts of the country. The chancellor Philip Hammond has had to warn them both that they cannot spend his £26bn Brexit contingency fund twice over.

And as to the Union, the ever more fragile Union between Scotland, England Wales and Northern Ireland, both Boris Johnston and Jeremy Hunt have been saying they will defend it whatever the cost may be. This time it was Mrs May who had to warn them that preserving the Union is their "[greatest duty.](#)" When she heard that, Nicola Sturgeon issued her own warning to both men that they will never undo the damage to the Union Mrs May has caused.

Curiously, we saw a little cross-border love creeping into the news this week. It follows an official report that the Borders region is "at a cross-roads" and needs massive government spending on railways and roads and tourist projects if it's not to fall into further decline. The Scottish Government is setting up a South of Scotland Enterprise Agency and the UK government is joining in with a cross-border deal worth nearly £400m. The plans include an up-grade to Carlisle

station in preparation for any extension to the Borders railway line, a new mountain biking centre in the Borders and a dairy innovation centre in Dumfriesshire.

I arrived back from my trip to the Highlands last weekend to find Edinburgh overflowing with tourists. And it's not even Festival time. A report out this week from the holiday firm CNN Travel links Edinburgh with other hotspots for what it calls "over-tourism" – Amsterdam, Venice, Barcelona. The number of visitors spending one night or more in Edinburgh has almost trebled in the last seven years and now stands at 4.2 million every year.

The city council is well aware of the issue, particularly as it affects the permanent residents. They complain about traffic jams, parking problems, crammed cafes and restaurants and piles and piles of rubbish. But it's bad for the tourists too, whose sheer numbers are spoiling the very things they have come to see – the cobbled Royal Mile, the churches and galleries, the famous historic sites and the breezy, lonely walks on Arthur's Seat and Calton Hill.



The five Festivals in August are becoming increasingly overwhelmed by numbers. Everything has to be booked and queued for. A lot of the spontaneity has been lost.

And the solutions ? Among the suggestions are: a tourist tax, curbs on the number of new hotels being built, a clampdown on airbnb rentals, traffic-free zones.

But so far many politicians, both local and national, have failed to give a lead, frightened that someone, somewhere in the city will be upset. (That said, there is another Open Streets event on Sunday – Edinburgh is the first UK city to do this. Get out on the Royal Mile and cycle or hula hoop your way down Victoria Street. Ed.)

Free marketeers say we should let the price of visiting Edinburgh rise automatically and fewer people will come. So far, however, higher prices have not halted the inflow and meanwhile visitors and residents are both becoming disgruntled.

Edinburgh is losing its glittering image on the world stage.

