

Letter from Scotland

Even in this age of uncertainty, we still have “Scotland’s oil.” 300m barrels of it have begun flowing from the largest oil field to come on stream in a decade. It’s from the Mariner Field, 95 miles east of Shetland. The only trouble is it’s not Scotland’s oil. It’s owned by the Norwegian state oil company Equinor. And, as Friends of the Earth keep pointing out, it’s incompatible with the Scottish Government’s climate change policy.

But there will be 70,000 barrels of crude oil a day spouting from its pipelines when it is running at peak production. The Mariner deposits have been known about for 40 years and Equinor has been sitting on the field for 25 years. It’s only in the last three years that technological advances have made it viable. That patience and £6bn of investment is, at last, about to produce a return.



The Mariner oil field comes on stream to polite applause
But should we be doing this at all? We are supposed to be de-carboning our economy. Equinor say they too are interested in renewable energy and all their oil is just a necessary transition to a carbon free future. That sounds like procrastination to me.

The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has had more than oil on her hands this week. She is perhaps being distracted by the latest offer from Jeremy Corbyn. He wants the SNP to join a grand coalition of opposition parties to unseat Boris Johnson and form a temporary government to block a no-deal Brexit and organise a general election. So far Ms Sturgeon has just said she's prepared to consider any plan to stop a no-deal Brexit. But then she added : "I'm not fan of Jeremy Corbyn."

The Scottish Conservatives have a suspicion there's been a clandestine deal between the SNP and Labour at Westminster. In exchange for joining the coup against Boris Johnson, Labour would not block a second referendum on Scottish independence. This, they say, would explain why the Labour leaders in London, both John McDonnell and Jeremy Corbyn, have overridden the Scottish Labour leader Richard Leonard and said Westminster should not stand in the way of a second referendum

if that's what the Scottish parliament wants.



Ruth Davidson appeared at Edinburgh International Book Festival although not to talk about politics© J.L.Preece

Oh dear, my life expectancy has just gone down. A Scotsman is now expected to die at 77, a woman at 81. This is younger than most European countries and has been caused by a sharp rise in drug deaths. The cause of that, in turn, is the subject of much soul searching...deindustrialisation, deprivation, an ineffective drugs policy.

Talking of deindustrialisation, the last civilian shipyard on the Clyde, Ferguson Marine, is about to go under. The

government is considering nationalising it, more in sorrow than in hope that it can be saved. A temporary rescue operation is needed however to save two unfinished ferries for the state-owned company Caledonian MacBrayne and the jobs of the 350 workers still left at the yard.

It looks like the end of a brave attempt by the businessman Jim McColl to refit the old Ferguson shipyard for the 21st century. He stepped in to buy the yard and save it from closure in the last desperate days of the independence referendum campaign in 2014. He was given a contract to build two ferries, one for the Arran service and one for the crossing from Skye to the Western Isles. They were to be pioneering dual-fuel ships, capable of running on either diesel oil or liquefied natural gas, but alas there have been serious complications and cost overruns.

Another brave businessman Richard Branson has also had a disappointing week. His Virgin rail company has lost out to the Aberdeen-based FirstGroup for the 12-year franchise to run the west coast rail service between Glasgow and London Euston. He says he's "devastated for the staff" after 22 years of success on the route. But FirstGroup say they will improve the service with refurbished trains, better wi-fi connections and a free film app.

School pupils in Scotland have been returning to their desks this week after the not-very-long school holidays. Their English colleagues on the other hand all seem to have congregated in Edinburgh for the rest of the Festival. This week the Book Festival opened its tents in Charlotte Square and the event now spills out onto neighbouring George Street.

The themes this year are "climate change, technology and food production." And there's to be an anxious debate about Brexit, "Has it changed the UK ?" Or, you may prefer to join the young children every morning for "a magical half hour of storytelling."

You just can't escape politics, can you?



The Bookshop on George Street is part of Edinburgh International Book Festival PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter