

Letter from Scotland

The shenanigans at Westminster may make you want to scream. And our screeching from north of the border is all the more desperate because the whole affair is so unnecessary. We didn't want Brexit or the Tory governments that have got us into this mess in the first place.



Activists from Edinburgh4Europe outside the Court of Session on 3 September 2019 PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter



The Scream (1893) by Edvard Munch

The 35 SNP MPs at Westminster joined the opposition alliance to defeat Boris Johnson and force through a law that prevents Britain leaving the European Union on the 31st of October without a deal. It reflected a vote in the Scottish Parliament on Thursday supported by all parties, except the Conservatives.

Nicola Sturgeon told MSPs she “relishes” the prospect of an early general election but, as I write, it’s not clear whether that will be before or after October 31st.

Whenever it is, the SNP are expected to do well since the Scottish Labour Party is still in meltdown and the Conservatives are without a leader and rather embarrassed by Boris’ behaviour in London. The temporary leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Jackson Carlaw, is trying to move the agenda on to more domestic matters... schools, the health service, crime and punishment. At First Minister’s Questions he accused Ms Sturgeon of being more interested in engineering another referendum on Scottish independence than on the day-to-day issues facing Scotland.

Certainly the programme for government this year, announced on Tuesday, includes an amendment to the current Referendum Bill which would transfer the power to call a referendum from

Westminster to Holyrood. The 14 new bills the First Minister announced will not cause many palpitations of the heart. They are largely technical changes, and this despite the programme being sold as a major assault on climate change and poverty.

It's true that £500m is to be spent on improving bus services and there's to be a new child poverty payment of £10 a week to eligible families. But these are slow-burning promises and unlikely to be controversial.



First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP announces the Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2019-20 at the Scottish Parliament, Edinburgh. 03 September 2019. Pic – Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

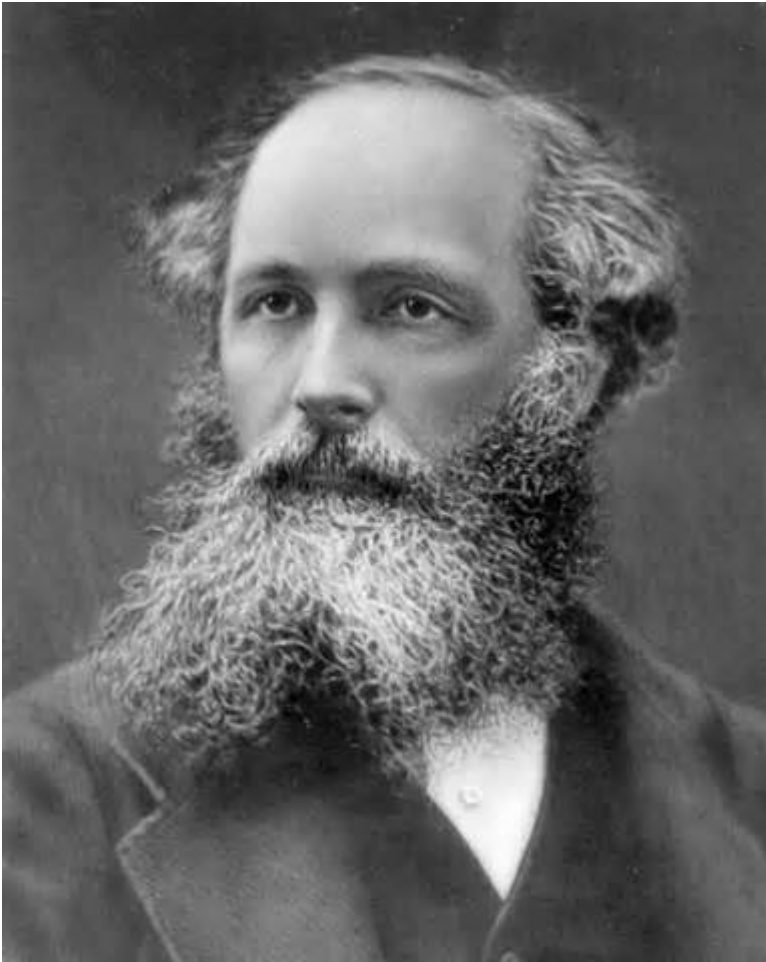
They have been made easier to fund by the new Chancellor Sajid Javid who has “turned the page on austerity” and announced an extra £13bn of government spending, 10 per cent of which comes

to the Scottish government, to be spent as it sees fit.

This weekend there are two more Irish Republican marches due to take place in Glasgow. The SNP administration on Glasgow Council have been criticised for allowing the marches to go ahead, despite the clashes that broke out last weekend between Republican and Loyalist marchers in Govan. Riot police had to be called in to separate the two sides. The council leader Susan Aitken said people had the right to march in a free society but perhaps the law needed to be “pushed” for councils to be able to take into account factors such as the heightened atmosphere caused by last weekend’s Old Firm match between Celtic and Rangers.

The former first minister Jack McConnell said the Scottish Government should be doing more to tackle what he called “the cancer of sectarianism” in Scotland. “It’s not just a one-off incident at a football match or disorder on a Friday night,” he said. “It’s an issue that stains the Scottish character.” The Justice Minister Humza Yousaf has agreed to consider a change in the law on marches but he said the blame lay with “grown men who think it’s OK to fight centuries old battles on the streets in 2019.”

Coming back to the modern world, scientists at Edinburgh University have apparently discovered a new type of light wave. They say it exists at the interface between certain crystals and substances such as water and oil and could be useful for fibre optics and the transmission of data. They have worked out the details using mathematical techniques pioneered by the 19th century Scottish scientist who first developed the idea of the electro-magnetic spectrum, James Clerk Maxwell.



James Clerk Maxwell

There is a centuries old myth that still persists in Scotland today and it's one our tourist trade is keen to preserve. But this week, scientists from Otago University in New Zealand published their findings in the age old quest for the Loch Ness monster. They concluded that if there was a monster it was probably a giant eel and not a prehistoric reptile. They analysed hundreds of DNA samples from the water in the loch and found evidence of the usual fish, deer, cattle, badgers, dogs, sheep and humans who'd enjoyed swimming in the loch over the years but no sign of the plesiosaur, or the Greenland shark, or

the escaped circus elephants or any of the other imaginary inhabitants of Loch Ness.

Does this undermine the Nessie story? Not a bit. You simply have to ask how big and ugly can an eel grow? And no one yet knows the answer to that, yet.