

Letter from Scotland

Does anyone else feel we are getting a little lost? Are we walking through a hedge? Is Birnham wood coming to Dunsinane? We are surrounded by confusion and turmoil – Brexit, independence, climate change. Who's in charge? Parliament, the law lords, the Queen, the people? Where are we heading ?



What's going on? PHOTO John Knox

"Something's going on," I heard the novelist Robert Harris say on the radio the other day, "and I can't quite put my finger

on it.” He was talking about politics in Britain, but also about the rise of nationalism across the world and distrust of the old order – governments, political parties, politicians in general, institutions and experts.

One of the explanations he offered was the invention of the internet. It has made everyone their own expert. It has crowded our brains with Twitter messages and the passing thoughts of celebrities and our friends and relations. It has coarsened our discourse. It has monopolised our waking hours and made us addicts of constant random information. It’s such a big change in the way we think that it can be compared with the invention of the printing press for the impact it may have on our civilisation.



Climate 'strikers' in Edinburgh 20 September 2019 PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter

Perhaps the younger generation will be able to make sense of this new world. As I write, thousands of them are planning to speak out on one of the big issues of our time, climate change. The Friday school strike involves pupils and students in 100 towns across Britain and 3,000 towns in 120 countries across the world.

The strikes have already persuaded everyone except Donald Trump to take climate change seriously. The Scottish parliament, and indeed the UK parliament, have declared a “climate change emergency” and both have begun setting targets for a zero-carbon economy. This week, Glasgow won the honour of staging the next big UN summit on climate change in December 2020.

Whether the young protesters will cycle more, fly less, stop using plastic cups, turn off more lights, and be less obsessed with economic growth, as currently measured, remains to be seen. This week we adults have been obsessing about Scotland’s poor economic performance. There have been headlines about us being on the brink of a recession after negative growth in the quarter to June. The Finance Secretary Derek Mackay blamed Brexit. “The responsibility for this contraction lies entirely with the UK government,” he said.

The Scottish Government, of course, is hoping that the UK parliament will be recalled so that the SNP can continue its fight against Brexit ever happening. And, like the rest of us, it’s waiting to see if the Supreme Court judges will, this weekend, support the Scottish appeal court’s ruling that the UK parliament has been suspended unlawfully.

Meanwhile there has been a

lot of flag-waving over the 5th anniversary this week of the Scottish independence referendum. The Scottish government already has a bill going through the Scottish parliament in preparation for a second independence referendum at the end of next year. Whether it will get Westminster's permission to do so depends on who is Prime Minister by then. If it's Boris Johnson, the answer will be "no, nae never." If it's Jeremy Corbyn the answer will be "maybe aye, maybe no."



PHOTO ©2014 Martin P McdDam

So much is up in the English air. It's hard to keep our feet on the ground. Scotland can only watch as the judges make their ruling, UK party conferences take place and the Brexit plot unfolds. Then there's a winter general election on the skyline and a possible second referendum on Brexit.

Watching the "Last Night of the Proms" on television last

Saturday night was therefore an unsettling experience. Was that English nationalism on display or was it just a bit of quaint old pageantry ? And that new aircraft carrier, the Prince of Wales, that left its shipyard at Rosyth on Thursday to float majestically in the Firth of Forth, is that Britain still “ruling the waves” or is it a vital part of Western defence against a future threat from Russia or China ?



Josh Littlejohn MBE founder of Social Bite

But there is one thing Scotland is doing to “keep feet on the ground” all over the world. The “Big Sleep Out” is going international.

It began on a chilly night in December 2017 when hundreds of people slept out in Princes Street Gardens in Edinburgh in solidarity with the homeless. This December there are to be similar events in 50 cities across the world, from Los Angeles to New Delhi. The “Sleep in the Park” campaign was begun by a young Edinburgh café owner Josh Littlejohn who, so far, has raised £8m for projects to help the homeless. In a way, we are all a little homeless, a little lost.