

Letter from Scotland

I suppose there were times before Brexit and Independence and Climate Change, when the only thing that changed in the autumn were the colours of the leaves. But it's difficult to remember them. We live now from crisis to crisis.

What will happen this weekend? Will we be in or out of the European Union? Will we be facing a general election or another EU referendum? Will London be brought to a standstill by the People's Vote march or Extinction Rebellion?



Changing colours

Here in Scotland we can only watch from a distance, and with some amazement and alarm. (except for the court case being brought by Jolyon Maugham in the Court of Session on Friday morning to ask the court to stop Westminster from passing the EU withdrawal agreement).

“Brexit shows that the Westminster system is broken,” Nicola Sturgeon told the SNP conference in Aberdeen on Tuesday. And she announced that, by the end of this year, she would be asking whoever is in charge at Westminster for permission to hold a second referendum on independence for Scotland.

In interviews, she’s been saying that party leaders at Westminster, seeking the SNP’s support for any new government, needn’t “even lift the phone to me” if they are not prepared to sanction a second Scottish referendum. There’s even talk of more legal action at the Supreme Court if a referendum is refused.

The political uncertainty is being blamed for yet another poor set of economic figures in Scotland. The number of people in work has fallen by nearly 40,000 according to the Office of National Statistics. Unemployment has risen by 20,000 and now stands at 4 per cent. Both figures are worse than the UK average. Sales in the shops are down by 2 per cent, according to the latest report from the Scottish Retail Consortium. And Scottish farmers are worried about exports of beef and lamb and what the special arrangements for Northern Ireland will mean for Scottish agriculture. There are even concerns that Scotland’s famous export of seed potatoes to the rest of Europe and Egypt will be in jeopardy.

Out at sea, the battle between environmentalists and the oil industry continued this week. Greenpeace campaigners climbed on board two old oil platforms in the Brent field east of Shetland and hung a large yellow banner saying “Clean up your mess, Shell.” They called on the company to abandon plans to leave parts of four redundant platforms on the seabed, along with oily sediment. Shell say their scientific studies have shown that leaving the sub-structure on the seabed is the best environmental option.

This week Glasgow has been looking after our cultural environment, staging the 2019 Gaelic MOD. It began with a replica Gaelic longboat being rowed up the River Clyde for a service of blessing at St Andrew’s Cathedral. It was followed by a shinty game, a women’s football match and over 200 competitions in singing, fiddle-playing, bagpiping and poetry.



Coisir Sgir a' Bhac after winning the Lorn Shield Sheriff MacMaster Campbell Memorial Quaich

There was much to celebrate in Scotland's exit from the Rugby World Cup last Sunday – at least I thought so. It was a wonderful game to watch, plenty of open running and brave tackling. Japan, however, were the more skillful team and deserved their 28-21 victory. It was good too to see the home team go through to the final rounds, especially after the destruction caused by typhoon Hagibis.

We've been mourning the death of Charles Jencks, the architect and philosopher who, with his wife, Maggie, founded the cancer care homes known as Maggie Centres. The first one was built in Edinburgh nearly 25 years ago, shortly after Maggie herself died of cancer. Others have followed in Glasgow, Dundee, Aberdeen and Inverness and in over 20 other places across Britain. Each has a very distinctive and modern style, designed to intrigue and up-lift patients and their carers.



The Maggie Highland Centre, Inverness. Earlier, the couple created a revolutionary "Garden of Cosmic

Speculation" at their home in Holywood near Dumfries.

I passed it on the train as I went to visit a friend in Dumfriesshire mid-week and caught a glimpse of its geometric mounds and terraces. I was in Dumfries, however, to see another garden, at Moat Brae House, where JM Barrie played as a boy in the 1870s. A local trust has beautifully restored the house and garden over the last ten years and created a magical place for story-telling and free-wheeling, childhood imagination.

Like Peter Pan, I felt I would never grow old and might even outlive Brexit!