

Letter from Scotland

If Britain is to leave the European Union – by way of a general election, a referendum or just a general muddle – will it leave Scotland facing another case of the Highland Clearances?

This is what's worrying our hill-farmers, fruit farmers, tourism businesses and struggling villages. It's also worrying our pensions industry and the health service as the population grows older and there are fewer young people to support it.

This week, the latest government figures prompted headlines such as: "Population growth in Scotland will be fuelled entirely by immigration."



Old man in an empty land. Painting by Thomas Faed 1887

The figures showed that in 2018 there were over 60,000 deaths but only 52,000 births. And although the overall population is rising from a virtual standstill at the beginning of the century to 5.2m today, it is due to immigration, largely from the rest of Europe.

But the population mix is getting older. If nothing changes

in the next 25 years, there will be a quarter of a million more elderly Scots and 7,000 fewer workers to support them.

Already the pressures are growing on the NHS and the care system. The Auditor General Caroline Gardner warned this week that there's a black hole of £1.8bn looming in the health budget over the next five years. 42 per cent of all Scottish Government spending goes on health, so there's not much room for further funding increases.

Unless we can attract more taxpayers into Scotland, the whole public sector will have to do less – hospitals, schools, the police, local council services. Hence the Scottish Government's plea for a more open immigration policy and for a flow of young workers into the country. There is plenty for them to do – staff the nursing homes and hospitals, take in the fruit harvest, run the hotels, build the houses, convert our energy system from fossil fuels to renewables.

Brexit does not sit easily with this vision, which explains the SNP government's opposition to it. On Monday, the party's 35 MPs at Westminster voted against Boris Johnston's new withdrawal deal. And they are still trying to gather support from Labour and the Liberal Democrats for a second EU referendum. But if that doesn't succeed and there is to be a general election before Christmas, as the Prime Minister wishes, then Nicola Sturgeon says she would welcome it.

And well she might, with the opposition parties in Scotland being in such disarray. The Conservatives are split over Europe – though their MPs have loyally fallen into line to support the present deal. But they are without their popular leader Ruth Davidson who resigned in August, partly over Europe, and has now taken a job with a [corporate communications firm](#) at a reputed fee of £50,000 a year, on top of her salary as an MSP. Hardly good PR for the party.



Ruth Davidson announces her resignation as leader of Scottish Conservatives August 2019 PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter

Labour have still not entirely gelled over Europe and a second referendum, for either Brexit or Scottish independence. And Labour's longest serving MP in Scotland, Ian Murray in Edinburgh South, faced (successfully) a [deselection attempt](#) by the Corbyn-supporting trade union Unite. Again, hardly good PR for the party.

But if Labour and the Conservatives are standing on shaky structures, at least it's not life threatening, like this week's emergency in the North Sea oil fields. 115 workers had to be airlifted off the Thistle platform 125 miles north east of Shetland on Monday evening. The operators EnQuest said it was a precautionary measure after an inspection revealed weakness in a sub-sea storage tank. A union official said he could only remember one other such incident in the last 40 years.

It wasn't the only emergency for the rescue helicopters this week. On Monday night the Oban Mountain Rescue team was

called out to an accident on Ben Cruachan. Apparently what happened was that a young family had taken a wrong turn on the way down the mountain in the dark and the mother fell 300ft into a ravine. Badly injured, she lay on a ledge just above another long drop. The father's phone wasn't working, so while he stayed with the two younger children, the 10 year-old son climbed down to his mother and used her phone to call the emergency services. He then stayed with her for several hours, keeping her conscious, until the Oban team arrived and she could be airlifted to hospital. Leaders of the team say they are going to recommend the 10 year-old boy for an award.

I think two other merit awards are due this week. One goes to Andy Murray who won the European Open tennis championship in Antwerp, his first victory since his hip replacement surgery in January.

And the other goes to Brian Souter, the co-owner of Stagecoach, who has announced he is giving another £109m to various charities, on top of the £98m he's already donated over the last 13 years. It's said to be the biggest gift to charity from a Scottish philanthropist since Andrew Carnegie.



At Carnegie Hall in 2019 there has been an exhibition called Migrations – the Making of America to mark the centenary of Carnegie's birth. Photo courtesy of Carnegie Hall Chris Lee