

Letter from Scotland

The schools are back, commuters cram the buses and trains, lines of car tail-lights snake slowly towards their destinations. All before the sun rises above our winter horizon. The return to work after the New Year break has been wet and blustery. There is even a dusting of snow on the lowland hills.



Weary winter and back to work PHOTO John Knox
Members of the two parliaments, at Westminster and Holyrood, have also returned to their trenches, grimly hunkering down on opposite sides of the Brexit divide. At Westminster, they

voted for Boris's Withdrawal Bill. At Holyrood there was an angry vote against, 92-29.

Nicola Sturgeon stormed off to Norway mid-week to assure business leaders there that Scotland, at least, was still interested in doing business with the outside world and wanted to develop its "natural partnership" with Norway.

Meanwhile, the campaign for Scottish independence goes on, with a large march in Glasgow this weekend. The "All Under One Banner" campaign group has organised a series of marches this year to keep the flag flying, another in Glasgow in May, followed by parades in Arbroath, Peebles, Elgin, Kirkcaldy, Stirling and culminating in Edinburgh in October.

In the Scottish parliament this week the finance secretary Derek Mackay complained at what he said was the latest Westminster "disrespect" for Scotland. He said Chancellor Sajid Javid had set his Budget Day so late (11th March) that it left only three weeks for him to draw up a Scottish Budget and have it approved by MSPs, a process that usually takes a leisurely three months. Apparently, if it's not approved by the end of March, the Scottish Government has no legal right to collect taxes.

It seems a strange default position to me – you would think the existing rules would apply – and in any case, Mr Javid, says the Scottish Government already has enough information to make realistic estimates of its grant next year. But it's another bone of contention for the SNP to gnaw and it will make local council budgets particularly hard to set, since they are legally obliged to have their budgets agreed by councillors by the said 11th March.



Ian Murray contender for the Deputy Leader of the Labour Party
PHOTO The Edinburgh Reporter

For those of us less interested in accountancy, the various party leadership races may give us more excitement. Labour's only MP in Scotland, Ian Murray from Edinburgh, has entered the contest to be deputy leader of the UK Labour Party, arguing that the party needs to move back into the centre ground of British politics. Michelle Ballantyne from the Borders is challenging Jackson Carlaw for the leadership of the Scottish Conservatives.

And we are left wondering if a Scot, perhaps Christine Jardine, will enter the somewhat heroic race to be the next leader of the UK Liberal Democrats.



Christine Jardine MP PHOTO The Edinburgh Reporter

At least these brave people are not foolhardy, unlike the two lorry drivers who, around mid-day on Tuesday, ignored the high-wind warnings on the AI in East Lothian, only to have their vehicles over-turned. Luckily no one was hurt. The procurator fiscal is deciding what to do with the rascals.

It was a shock to discover this week that the number of people smoking is no longer declining. It follows a seven-year fall and it means over 800,000 people are still putting their health at risk. The figure can partly be explained by the rise in the overall population, but the rise is particularly noticeable in poorer communities living under greater stress. It's led to calls for new publicity campaigns which have been subject to cuts in recent years.

Another shock came from the on-going official inquiry into historic child abuse led by a judge, Lady Smith. She has concluded that "children were emotionally, physically and sexually abused" in care homes between 1921 and 1991 run by the famous orphanages Quarriers, Aberlour and Barnardos. "Many

children did not find the warmth, care and compassionate comfort they needed," she said. The inquiry heard evidence from 110 witnesses.

All this is indeed shocking but what the enquiry has not established, as far as I can see, is how widespread the abuse was and what percentage of the thousands of orphans being cared for were subject to such terrible treatment. There must surely have been some kind and responsible staff who did their best for the children.

Finally, we are being challenged to get a little fitter as a nation by the "rowing brothers." Lachlan, Jamie and Ewan MacLean from Edinburgh are currently half way across the Atlantic, taking part in the Talisker Whisky Challenge, and they've made a video encouraging those of us meekly onshore, to jump on a rowing machine and row 3,000 metres to parallel their 3,000 mile journey across the Atlantic. Humm, I think I'll stick to my bike which is facing enough Atlantic gales at the moment as I make my way 3,000 metres around the windy streets of Edinburgh.



The MacLean brothers who are midway across the Atlantic in the Talisker Whisky Challenge