

Letter from Scotland

**“O Scotia ! my dear, my native soil !
For whom my warmest wish to heaven is
sent,
Long may thy hardy sons of rustic toil
Be blest with health and peace and sweet
content.”**

If this is how Robert Burns measured “wellbeing”, he would be saddened to hear this week’s news that Scotland has slipped down the world rankings. We’ve fallen five places in the latest OECD table of national wellbeing. We’re now in the bottom half of the 32 countries surveyed, overtaken by the likes of Estonia, South Korea and even England!

It’s a welcome development that countries are increasingly recording their “progress” in this wider measure, rather than just GDP or national income. Burns would be the first to say that life is about more than money. So it’s to our shame that, on this Burns Supper weekend, we appear to have fallen behind on health, education and equality, as well as income. We’ve dropped from 16th place to 21st.

Top of the list is Switzerland, then Norway, Japan, Iceland and Sweden. England is in 12th place, unchanged from 2006. It’s no comfort to Scotland that Wales and Northern Ireland are below us in the table and we are all above miserable Greece.

On Wednesday, a day after the OECD results were announced, Nicola Sturgeon was quick to tell a meeting of the Wellbeing Economy Alliance in Edinburgh that “the goal of all economic policy should be collective wellbeing.” That is why the Scottish government’s up-coming budget would tackle inequality

as well as competitiveness. “We want to ensure that work is fulfilling and well paid and that no one is left behind in the transition to zero carbon economy.”

The opposition parties this week have been vying with each other to campaign for more money for our 32 local councils. They point out that, although the Scottish government’s funding from Westminster has been cut by 2 per cent over the years of austerity, the cut to council budgets has been 6 per cent. They don’t of course explain where the savings should be made from other budgets, like health or the police. But that’s the optical illusion of politics we’ve become used to.



unknown artist; The Cotter’s Saturday Night; The National Trust for Scotland, Robert Burns Birthplace Museum; <http://www.artuk.org/artworks/the-cotters-saturday-night-197329>

Another trick of the politicians is to set a target for the zero carbon society – in 2045 in Scotland’s case – but without being too scary about how we are going to get there. Because it will mean big and painful changes, like higher taxes on

energy, levies on pollution, banning cars from city centres, refusing oil exploration licences, changing regulations on domestic heating etc.

This week we heard from the Committee on Climate Change that we should be cutting our meat consumption by 20 per cent and subsidising farmers to plant more trees. This will have a major impact on Scotland where agriculture is a relatively large industry. The National Farmers Union says farmers have already cut their greenhouse gas emissions by 30 per cent. They remain willing to change fertiliser practices, improve livestock handling, restore peatlands, plant more trees, but they can only do so with government help.

One industry which has had considerable government help is shipbuilding, without much success it has to be said. This week MSPs began an inquiry into what has gone wrong at the Ferguson Shipyard on the Clyde. The yard has had to be nationalised after the cost of building two ferry boats suddenly leapt from £100m to £200m and they still lie in the yard half-finished and three years late. Management at the yard blame last minute changes in design by the agency which ordered the ferries on behalf of Caledonian MacBrayne. The agency blames the yard for poor management of the project. It looks like the government will have little choice but to call it a draw and stump up the extra £100m to get the ferries finished.

Meanwhile we taxpayers will just have to look the other way and enjoy the Burns weekend and the rest of the Celtic Connections folk festival.



Thousands gathered in Glasgow's city centre today for a giant outdoor spectacle as part of Celtic Connections opening weekend celebrations and Scotland's Year of Coasts and Waters

2020. PHOTO ©2020 The Edinburgh Reporter

And while that is happening in Glasgow, the Western Isles council is gearing up for yet another Gaelic revival. From next year, all primary school pupils will be taught all subjects in Gaelic, unless their parents opt out. English will only be introduced into the curriculum from P4 onwards. The council says 52 per cent of people in the Western Isles already speak Gaelic but they want to increase that rate to preserve the language and its culture. Bilingualism, they say, also improves attainment in all subjects and improves job prospects in later life.

We are back to “wellbeing” and Burns’ insistence that native culture, a feeling of brotherhood and belonging are as important as a decent income. So come on Scotland! Let’s get back into the upper half of that table of happiness.