

# Letter from Scotland

So, we have been “dragged out of the European Union against our will,” to quote our feisty first minister. But MSPs voted defiantly to keep the European flag flying outside the Scottish Parliament.

They went on to vote for a second referendum on Scottish independence and Nicola Sturgeon insists she wants to hold it this year. She’s due to outline her plans on Friday morning as to how she will campaign to overcome Westminster’s refusal to allow such a referendum.

All of this is largely symbolic. But in politics symbolism counts for more than reality and this weekend there is the sense that we are falling off the edge of Europe and being cast adrift on a wide and threatening sea.

Not everyone sees it that way of course. The Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats have quietly accepted the inevitability of Brexit and voted against keeping the star spangled blue banner flying. They also voted against a second referendum. So the country is still more or less equally divided about how to approach the future.

This week our nervousness about the future revealed itself in pleas from the fishing industry that it should not be used as

a bargaining chip in the trade negotiations that begin with the EU in March. There are also worries about the supply of cheap and high quality workers from Europe who are so desperately needed in our health, social care, tourism and agriculture industries. Indeed, immigrants generally are needed to prevent our population declining and becoming too old for its own good.



First Minister Nicola Sturgeon MSP speaking during the Scottish Government Debate in the name of Nicola Sturgeon on Scotland's Future. 29 January 2020 . Pic – Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

On Wednesday Nicola Sturgeon announced plans for a separate “Scottish visa” which would allow migrants into the country on less restrictive terms than the UK’s new “points-based system”, provided they settled here in Scotland. In a 92-page document she spelled out how the system would work, tracking visa holders by their addresses and their Scottish tax code. But no sooner had she published her plans than the UK government slapped them down, saying immigration would remain a matter reserved to Westminster.

Mind you, immigrants might want to think twice about coming to Scotland after reading reports this week on inequality, air pollution, our alcohol consumption and our children's wellbeing.

The gap between rich and poor has grown to a ten-year high, as far as health is concerned. The poorest 10 per cent of Scots are now four times more likely to die early. In the map of deprivation across Scotland, the poorest area is Greenock town centre. The richest is Stockbridge in Edinburgh.

However, not all is idyllic in Edinburgh. More people die from air pollution than in any other Scottish city. Apparently, one in 29 deaths is caused by poor air quality, which I find surprising in such a windy city. But, according to the Centre for Cities, the pollution is not all due to vehicle exhausts, some of it comes from dust, sea-spray and those fashionable wood-burning stoves.

Scotland has a well-known problem with alcohol. We drink more than any other country in the UK, the equivalent of 27 bottles of Vodka per adult per year. But there was good news this week – the new law on minimum pricing, introduced in May 2018, has resulted in a 3.6 per cent fall in alcohol sales.

But our children's health is not doing so well, according to the latest survey of school-aged children. It reports the worst results for 24 years. 35 per cent of children said they suffered a health complaint every week. The most common complaints were difficulty sleeping, nervousness and irritability. Personally, I blame smart phones which 95 per cent of young people now possess. Nearly one in ten of them reported problems with "social media".

Perhaps we need to go back to simpler times. In Shetland this week they did just that with the revival of the ancient ceremony of Up Helly Aa. A thousand Viking warriors (all men) paraded through the streets of Lerwick on Tuesday night

bearing flaming torches. Women and non-Vikings had to watch from the sidelines as the bearded ones threw their torches into a wooden longboat and pushed it out to sea. There it burnt up the evils of the past year and lit up the dark winter sky.

Was this another symbolic gesture about Brexit I wonder? Can anything good come of it? Or must we just set out on the dark sea alone, singing Auld Lang Syne as our six MEPs did as they left the European Parliament for the last time on Wednesday.

The sad thing is that no one sang Will Ye No Come Back Again.

