

Letter from Scotland

This week's announcement on immigration from the UK government has exposed yet again the fault lines between England and Scotland over Brexit.

The new 70 points system will end the freedom of movement across Europe which our First Minister Nicola Sturgeon says will be "devastating" for the Scottish economy.

And you can see why. We have 198,000 foreign workers in Scotland, and 141,000 of them come from the EU (2018 figures). They work in our universities, hospitals, care homes, hotels, cafes, food factories, bus companies and farms. Nearly 10,000 are needed on our farms alone. We also have an ageing population, badly in need of young taxpayers and, frankly, we need new blood to prevent our population declining and our culture becoming lazy.



Like Lady Liberty, Nicola Sturgeon would welcome more immigrants to the Firth of Forth
Scotland has half as many EU migrants than the UK as a whole. We also have far fewer people from ethnic minorities, only 2.6 per cent are of Asian origin compared with 7 per cent in England and only 0.5 per cent are of African or Caribbean origin compared to 3 per cent in England. So it's not that Scots are less xenophobic than the English, it's just that immigration is not such a big issue. (We have other fish to fry, like sectarianism and anglophobia.)

The Secretary of State for Scotland Alister Jack wrote in The Herald that the new immigration system would be good for the Scottish economy. He said : “The system will be less restrictive than at present.

“Under the present system for skilled workers, people coming to the UK need the offer of a degree-level job, with a salary of £30,000 or more. Employers recruiting them must also pass a Resident Labour Market Test by advertising the job here first.

“In future, there will be no Resident Market Labour Test. And no cap either, as there is at present. And the minimum salary threshold is being reduced from £30,000 to £25,600.

“I believe this new, lower salary will work well for Scotland, not least because wages are higher here than anywhere in the UK apart from London and the South East of England. It will deliver the people our economy needs – and, crucially, protect the wages of people already living here.”



The Water of Leith Photo taken on 9 February 2020 by Thomas Haywood

This week, however, we learned to have greater sympathy for England, and indeed for Wales, with all the flooding that's been bringing

misery to families in Yorkshire and the Rhondda Valley. We were lucky compared with them but Storm

Dennis also brought heavy rain to Scotland and flooding to some parts of the

Borders.

Council services have been

tested yet again. And this at a time

when they are lobbying the Scottish government for more money.

The 32 councils

say they are £400m short of that they need just to keep

services as they are. This week, Edinburgh and Glasgow councils decided to increase their council tax by nearly 5 per cent. But they will still have to make cuts in services.



Edinburgh City Chambers. Photo: Martin P. McAdam
www.martinmcadam.com

The Scottish prison service is also creaking at the seams, literally in the case of Barlinnie Prison in Glasgow. A report out this week from MSPs on the audit committee asked for a plan B if the Victorian prison with its 1500 inmates became unfit for human habitation. It's currently at 40 per cent over capacity, while a new prison is being built.

The universities too are under financial pressure. Lecturers have begun another series of strikes, protesting against a 1.8 per cent pay rise and major changes to their pensions.

It's all led to political pressure on the new Scottish Conservative leader Jackson Carlaw to lobby his colleagues in London for a real end to "austerity" in next month's UK budget and to press for a separate immigration policy for Scotland. Nicola Sturgeon told him at First Minister's Questions to stand up openly for Scotland and not simply remain "quietly livid."

The strangest story of the week is the news that the island of Unst in Shetland is to become a "spaceport". Apparently a private equity company based in Hong Kong is investing £2m to build a NASA style launch pad for commercial satellites, the

first to be launched later this year. I say strange, because it seems it will face competition from a similar spaceport just two hundred miles away at Melness in Sutherland. However in that case, the planning application is being opposed by environmental groups because it is bang in the middle of a precious peat bog which is usefully absorbing our carbon waste.

Less strange is the triumph of Scotland's latest pop star, Lewis Capaldi, at the Brit Awards on Tuesday night. He won the best song and best newcomer awards. His song "Someone You Loved" was the best-selling pop song of the year and his first album the best-selling album of the year. Its title gives you an insight into this mischievous 23 year old, "Divinely Uninspired to a Hellish Extent."

He began his career in the traditional way, singing in his local pubs in West Lothian at the age of nine and recording his first song on his iPhone in his bedroom at home in Bathgate, where he still lives with his parents.

Like many of us, including me, he comes from a family of immigrants. Thank goodness they had those 70 points.

Featured image by Thomas Haywood