

Letter from Scotland

“Independence is not the problem, it’s the solution.”

That’s the headline from Nicola Sturgeon’s announcement this week that The Scottish Government intends to hold an independence referendum in October next year. It’s certainly set the political heather alight, and both Labour and the Conservatives have been fire-fighting, saying a referendum would be a wasteful distraction and illegal.

But Ms Sturgeon, with her partners the Greens, ploughed on, with the publication on Wednesday of the first of a series of papers which they hope will frame the debate on independence over the next 18 months. It compares Scotland with a list of ten other small nations which have made a success of independence (Ireland, Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, Belgium, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Austria) and argues they are wealthier, happier and fairer than Scotland is as part of the UK.



Alone on the wide blue sea

Poverty rates, it says, are lower, inequality is lower, there is a smaller gender pay gap, business investment is higher, expenditure on research and development is higher. What the paper doesn't explain is that taxation may be higher in other countries, or health services have to be paid for, or resources and cultures may be different. But at least the comparisons give us pause for thought.

There will be other weighty papers published over the course of the campaign, on issues such as currency, defence, trade with the EU, and how a referendum can be made "legal". This latter point has become the focus of debate by some politicians, journalists, lawyers, and other pettifoggers. As if a referendum can ever be legal or illegal ! It's a political thing. Nicolas Sturgeon, however, insists it must be accepted as authoritative by all concerned but how she will do this remains a mystery.

Boris Johnson's government certainly won't accept it as authoritative, nor will Conservatives in Scotland. But, as Ms Sturgeon points out, Boris may not be Prime Minister much longer, and his predecessor David Cameron did accept Scotland's right to hold a similar referendum in 2014.

The restlessness in Scotland over our position in the United Kingdom and, perhaps, why we are divided right down the middle on the issue, is because we have reached an "Age of Uncertainty". We are dangling between the world I grew up in, of certainty over our nationality, our politics, our religion, our relationships, our culture and the new world of globalism, lack of leadership in our politics, a rejection of religion, caution over our relationships and diversity of cultures.

So the thought creeps in that "modern" countries like Ireland, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, have transitioned to the new world, while England has not. A sign of that is its decision to leave the European Union and return to its dreams of the Empire. Scotland, on the other hand, voted to stay in the European Union and is now revisiting its role in the Empire. A government funded steering group this week recommended the establishment of a museum of "empire, colonialism and slavery".

But getting back to Nicola Sturgeon's problems rather than her solution, we are heading into a rail strike next week which looks like wiping out most rail services across Scotland for the whole seven days. And it is not the only pay dispute on the horizon – council workers, NHS staff, teachers, the police are all joining the clamour for more than the 2 per cent pay rise on offer. The Scottish Government is trying to distance itself from the negotiations, saying it's up to the direct employers or to the Westminster government to reach settlements.

Industrial disputes these days are not on the grand scale of the miners' strike of the 1980s, at least, not yet. So The

Scottish Parliament, on Thursday, was happy enough to grant a pardon the 500 Scottish miners convicted of breach of the peace and other misdemeanours during those troubled times. There will be no compensation however, despite the fact that many lost their jobs – and the chance of alternative employment – as a result of their convictions. Rough justice and late justice.

But those days are gone now and the Age of Coal is over – at least in Scotland. We've moved on to wind power, with a little help from oil and gas. This week we learnt that the UK's first all-electric bus service, Ember Coaches, between Edinburgh and Dundee (14 buses a day in each direction) is planning to offer a service between Glasgow and Dundee from August. It hopes to expand into the Highlands as soon as a re-charging network is established.

And this summer's HebCelt Festival in Stornoway will be powered entirely by "green hydrogen". The generators for the stage and tents will not be using diesel but hydrogen made using electricity from a wind farm in Harris.

We are indeed entering a new age, but whether that includes Scottish independence depends on what happens in the next 18 months.



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A stylized graphic illustration of a tent with a flag on top, set against a background of musical notes and a landscape with trees. The tent is drawn with white lines on a green and blue background. The words "ÒRAN" and "CRAIC" are written in yellow on the tent's sides. There are also white line drawings of two people dancing and a small boat on the water.