

Letter from Scotland

Nursery rhymes can be so ironic. "Christmas is coming, the geese are getting fat, please put a penny in the old man's hat." True, Christmas is coming, though it is a bit of shock after a long mild autumn.

We think it's been the warmest three months since 1884 (average temperature 9.1°C or 50°F). The geese, however, are not in good condition. We have had the worst outbreak of avian flu that anyone can remember. And as for "the old man's hat", he needs more than a penny, with the cost of living rising by more than 10 per cent.

School teachers have been on strike for the first time in 40 years, demanding a pay rise of 10 per cent to, at least, keep pace with inflation. The national strike only lasted a day but there is now a series of one-day local strikes taking place across the country.



Christmas is coming!

Nursing unions are balloting their members on a new offer of 7.5 per cent. The Royal College of Nursing had threatened to strike, for the first time in its history, if the original offer of 5 per cent was not improved. The cry for more funding for the NHS has been the constant sound of the autumn, coming from hospital doctors, GPs, ambulance staff, nurses and auxiliaries. Waiting lists and waiting times grow longer.

In a long-term effort to ease the crisis, the government is setting up a National Care Service to move patients quickly out of hospitals and into nursing homes or care packages at home. But this week, The Scottish Parliament's Finance Committee pointed out the big flaw in the plans – the cost. It's put at somewhere between £660 million and £1.2 billion, and most of that looks like going on setting up a new bureaucracy. The real cost will be much more.

Unlikely as it was, Theresa May's government and Boris

Johnson's tried to solve this problem, but quickly gave up. And an earlier attempt under a Labour government was also abandoned, even though it had cross-party support. The idea came from Andy Burnham who suggested a 10 per cent care-tax on every citizen's assets at the point of retirement. It seems a good solution to the unfairness of old age and would free up the health service to do its proper job.



Portrait of Doddie Weir OBE by Gerard M Burns on loan to the National Galleries of Scotland

This week we lost one of the victims of the unfairness of ill health at any age, the rugby star Doddie Weir. He died at the

age of just 52 after a six-year battle against motor-neurone disease. During that time he used his rugby fame, and his colourful tartan suits, to lead a campaign which raised more than £8 million for research into the causes and cures of MND and help for others who are suffering from it. On and off the pitch, he was a well-loved giant of a man.

Scotland has been slow to adopt the concept of National Parks – even though they were pioneered by a man from Dunbar. But finally, just 20 years ago, the new Scottish Parliament created two of them, one in the Cairngorms and the other around Loch Lomond. Now the government is consulting on a third, perhaps in the Western Isles or Galloway. But it also wants to add a fifth aim to the remit of all national parks, the fight against climate change.

This is radical and controversial because it may require some serious rebalancing with the other aims of the parks – “to conserve the natural and cultural heritage of the area, to promote the sustainable use of its natural resources, to promote the understanding and enjoyment of the area by the public and to promote sustainable social and economic development.” So, for example, gamekeepers may fear that moor-burning will be banned and hill-walkers fear their views will be spoilt by new wind-farms and the tourism industry fears that carbon-burning cars may be banned.



Ian Blackford MP PHOTO ©UK Parliament / Jessica Taylor

The national parks are not the only thing being rebalanced this week. The SNP group of 45 MPs at Westminster are in the throes of deciding on a new leader. Ian Blackford is resigning after five years in the job. I've rather enjoyed his rotund rhetoric at prime minister's question time. The speculation is that he will be replaced by a younger, thinner man from Aberdeen, Stephen Flynn.

It's not clear if there are any ideological reasons behind this game of musical chairs. Indeed, it's remarkable how united the SNP MPs and MSPs have been over the years. I would have expected more friction between left and right and between gradualists and revolutionaries. Instead the only cracks are over unlikely issues like gender recognition and demonstrations outside abortion clinics.

Further proof of the unfairness of the world came this week when the very country where the international game of football began exactly 150 years ago found itself a spectator, instead of a player, in the World Cup. We are left watching other

British nations taking part, or Scots players in Canadian or Australian teams. But to remind us of our loss, boys and girls from Hyndland Primary School in Glasgow recreated that famous game on St Andrew's Day 1872 when Scotland played against England in the world's first football international. The score ? 0-0.