

# Letter from Scotland

**In his first big speech, our new First Minister Humza Yousaf has bowed to industry pressure to postpone a bottle return scheme which appears to be working well across much of northern Europe.**

It's estimated it would recycle a third of the litter that despoils our streets and countryside. And it would keep us on the righteous road towards a low carbon future.

Mr Yousaf blames the Westminster government for delaying the scheme by refusing to grant an opt-out to regulations under the UK Internal Markets Act. The opt-out would have allowed bottles produced in England to be sold in Scotland with different conditions attached. Under the "Deposit Return Scheme" (DRS) customers who return an empty bottle will be entitled to be given their 20p deposit back. It would also allow for different labels and bar-codes.



Bottled out! Return this bottle and get 20p, but not till next year.

It all gets quite complicated. And that's what the drinks and retail industries are complaining about. They have become used to polluting the planet with their products for decades, without paying for the privilege. Under the DRS, they will have to accept returned bottles, refund the 20p, and pay a fee to Circularity Scotland to have the bottles taken away for recycling.

I can't help thinking that the Westminster government is taking advantage of this industry anger to hold out against Scotland going it alone on the righteous road to low-carbon. It's a road ten other European countries have taken and all have found that over 80 per cent of bottles are returned. In Norway and Germany it's over 95 per cent.

For Humza Yousaf, the advantage of the postponing the DRS is that it allows time for changes to the scheme, to make it more

acceptable to small retailers. But promising to go ahead next March keeps his Circular Economy Minister Lorna Slater and her Green Party firmly inside his coalition.

In his first few weeks in office, Mr Yousaf has had to balance on a precarious high rope, rigged between the various factions in the SNP which, somewhat surprisingly, emerged during the leadership contest. We all thought Nicola Sturgeon had left him a tidy ship but since then it's run into the quick-sands of financial scandal.

This week, the party treasurer [Colin Beattie](#) had to resign after he was arrested by the police as part of their investigation into the "missing £600,000". He was later released without charge, just like the party's chief executive Peter Murrell, who also happens to be Ms Sturgeon's husband. I'm quite prepared to believe that the money is missing simply because it was spent on general campaigning, or paying off party debts, rather than, as promised, on a second referendum campaign but I am alarmed that we haven't had an explanation.



Police at SNP Headquarters Edinburgh after police arrested Peter Murrell in connection with party's finances. PHOTO Alan Simpson Photography

So the rest of poor Mr Yousaf's "big speech" on Tuesday was rather overshadowed by his retreat on DRS and this unseemly police investigation. It's a pity, because we got a clear indication of what this new administration is all about. He even entitled it "A Fresh Start for Scotland."

It's surprisingly left wing. The three big aims are "to tackle poverty, the build a green and growing economy and to improve public services." He wants to spend a huge £1.3 billion on the Scottish Child Payment over the next three years. He wants free school meals expanded. He wants to target funds on deprived areas. He is aiming for "the most progressive tax system in the UK". And his "new deal" for business is centred on his idea of "a welfare economy". He's also abolishing high peak-time fares on the railways and he's allowing councils to double council tax on empty or second homes.

"Independence" was only mentioned once, and then only in a passing remark about the evils of Brexit. He is, however, to challenge the UK government over its block on the Gender Recognition Bill. Overall though, the events of the three months since Nicola Sturgeon resigned, have left the cause of independence drifting towards the sandbanks, to be stuck there for a generation.



### “Union Bridge”

As if to symbolise the point, the famous “Union Bridge” over the River Tweed at the Scottish/English border was re-opened on Monday after a £10 million restoration. It was opened in 1820 and was the first suspension bridge in Britain, held in place by mighty wrought iron chains, the invention of sea captain Samuel Brown. Even the chains are symbolic of the links between Scotland and England which were, for a time, very nearly broken.