

Letter from Scotland

The High Constabulary of the Port of Leith formed the guard of honour for the new tram service down Leith Walk to Newhaven which took its first fare-paying passengers this week.

The famous tongue-twisting “Leith Police” were formed in 1611 to bring order to the streets and dignity to Edinburgh’s sea port with their smart uniforms, top hats and black batons.



The High Constables welcomed the tram to Leith
We can laugh at the slightly Gilbert and Sullivan scenes on Leith Walk, but the plot of the transport opera in Scotland in recent years is no laughing matter. In fact the Transport Minister Kevin Stewart resigned this week, saying the job was just too much for his mental health.



Smooth new trams, bumpy old transport.

The City of Edinburgh Council says the new tram line to Newhaven has been completed on time and on budget. But it started out costing £165m and has ended up at £207m. It was supposed to be part of the original plan to build a tram line right across Edinburgh, from the airport to Granton. That ran into a quagmire of problems, resulting in a delay of six years, a bill of £776 million (twice the estimate) and only half the line completed. The Hardie inquiry into what went wrong has still not reported, after spending nine years and £13 million wading through the paperwork.

Then there are “the ferries”. This is a long sea shanty of issues. The latest crisis concerns the islanders of South Uist. Their ferry, the “Lord of the Isles”, which normally sails between Mallaig and Lochboisdale, has been diverted to serve other routes, leaving South Uist without a direct ferry service for most of June.

The problem is that Caledonian MacBrayne just don't have enough ships to service all of their 50 routes. Although the

government says it's invested £2 billion in ferries since 2007, much of the fleet of 30 ships is old and subject to breakdowns. Two new ferries being built at Ferguson's shipyard on the Clyde are six years late and three times over-budget. Four ferries ordered from a yard in Turkey have only just started to be built.



The council has leased this Pothole Pro for six months on a trial basis

Then there are the roads. Everyone is talking about potholes, especially politicians with no solutions for how we should pay to have them repaired. There is talk of duelling the whole of the A9 between Perth and Inverness – in fact that saga has been going on for years. This week, we were talking about the A83, the “Rest and Be Thankful” hill road from Loch Lomond to Argyll. A government plan has been announced to build a shelter covering a troublesome mile of the road where there have been landslides in recent years. That will cost an estimated £470 million. I can't understand why it wouldn't be cheaper to resurface the parallel road built in the 18th

century by General Wade who had the sense not to build it on a slithery hillside.

The basic problem is that governments, north and south of the border, have been unwilling to raise enough taxes to ensure we have decent public services. Transport is just this week's example.

But there is the subsidiary issue of how public money is spent. Yes, there are shocking inefficiencies, as we've seen with the trams and the ferries, but there are strategic errors as well. In transport there's not enough progress to meet our climate change targets. In health, we're spending a lot on repairs and not enough on prevention. In education, we spend lavishly on academic achievement and not enough on practical skills. And in sport, there's a lot spent on elite sportsmanship and not enough on general health, fitness and enjoyment.

As for the environment, the issue this week, as last week, is The Scottish Government's Deposit Return Scheme for those drink containers we just throw away in the street or on beautiful country roadsides. On Wednesday, Lorna Slater, the Minister for the Circular Economy was forced to turn full-circle and announce that the return scheme was being put on hold till at least 2025.

It follows the UK government's intervention, insisting that glass bottles be taken out of the scheme. There are several reasons. One is that glass is already widely recycled. Another is that the producers and retailers would rather wait till a UK wide scheme is rolled out. And the third is that the Tories really don't care for devolution and don't want The Scottish Parliament or government doing things on their own.

All in all, this has been an expensive week for The Scottish Government. They've promised another £700 million for new ferries and perhaps compensation for the islanders of South

Uist and the businesses who have bought equipment to handle the plastic bottles that won't now be returned till 2025.

In these tax-averse times, the government will have to make cuts elsewhere. But please, let's spare the High Constabulary of the Port of Leith.

Aerial shots of the trams running up and down the line near Ocean Terminal courtesy of [@thaywoodphoto](https://twitter.com/nG1oV4Zw9j) pic.twitter.com/nG1oV4Zw9j

– Edinburgh Reporter (@EdinReporter) [June 7, 2023](#)



Dance teacher Jonathan Burnett led the Ballet of the Trams with his ballet students from Dance Base and friends from Dance for All. Trams to Newhaven launched on 7 June 2023 at noon ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter



Opening of the line between Picardy Place and Newhaven on 7 June 2023 PHOTO Ross Nixon