

Letter from Scotland

The Union Canal linking Edinburgh to Falkirk, and thus to the Forth-Clyde Canal and Glasgow, was called the “mathematical canal” because it follows the 73 metre contour for 31 miles to the Falkirk Wheel. But it’s also a very political canal, even today.

Construction began in 1822, just as King George IV paid the first royal visit to Scotland for 200 years. There were fears in Westminster that Scotland was becoming so radicalised, that it would follow the French and American revolutions and declare itself an independent republic. Sir Walter Scott was engaged as the PR man for the visit and did such a brilliant job that “tartan” Scotland became a valued and charmingly romantic province of the British Empire.



Keeping traditions afloat. Edinburgh Quay on the Union Canal. As the Empire declined, so did the canal. But when Westminster next woke up to the Scottish “issue” and allowed the Scottish Parliament to meet again, money was somehow found to give the canal a £78m Millennium up-grade. The canal is now a fashionable place to build homes, offices, schools and go cycling, running and boating.

But in election year, the same old radicalisation is feared at Westminster. So Wednesday’s budget from the Chancellor is a desperate attempt to save the Union and the Conservative Party in Scotland.



It contains measures which Jeremy Hunt hopes will please the Scots – a 2 per cent cut in National Insurance, extending child benefit, not increasing the excise duty on whisky and giving The Scottish Parliament an extra £300m a year to spend as it pleases. However his decision to keep the windfall tax on oil and gas companies for an extra year has embarrassed the Conservative leader in Scotland Douglas Ross who, even in the last few days, has been insisting it would be disastrous for investment and jobs in the North East.

The Conservatives only have seven MPs in Scotland but that puts them in second place to the SNP who stormed to another victory at the last election with 43 MPs. The SNP finance secretary Shona Robinson has, of course, condemned the budget as “a betrayal of the public services.” She said this was not the time for tax cuts and in her own budget she increased income tax by £1.5bn, a lot of it from higher earners. It should be mentioned, however, that she has cut tax for council-tax payers by offering £200m (in total) to councils who agree to freeze the tax rather than implement a planned

increase of 5 per cent. But you can't have too much consistency in politics.

The SNP have been quiet of late on the issue of independence, waiting for that magic 60 per cent support in the opinion polls. But this week the party published its defence policy for an independent Scotland. The external affairs secretary Angus Robertson said Scotland would have its own military forces and security agency and it would seek to join NATO and agree to spend 2 per cent of national income on defence. Controversially, the Trident nuclear submarines at Faslane would be removed but the timescale would be "the subject of negotiation."

So as the election looms, the issue of independence has not gone away. The Labour Party, if it wishes to come marching back from its disastrous showing at the last election (only one MP), will have to win over many SNP voters and be careful what it says about independence. It's been loosely talking about a "federal" UK with more devolution all round, including more powers for local councils.

The Royal National Lifeboat Institution has been celebrating its 200th anniversary this week, which takes us back to the brave times of the 1820s and the Union Canal. Then, the Union included southern Ireland, and the RNLi is still a British Isles institution, covering all Ireland, England, Scotland and Wales, and the Isle of Man where its founder Sir William Hillary first thought of the idea. The RNLi is almost unique in the world in being independent of government, supported by legacies and donations. Its 440 lifeboats are crewed largely by volunteers. There are 46 lifeboat stations in Scotland and they've saved 11,800 lives over those 200 years.

It's astonishing to think how much has changed since the RNLi was founded, from those heavy rowing boats to the jet-driven launches of today, bristling with electronics. The Union Canal too has changed. In fact it changed rather quickly after it

was built, because it was overtaken by the railway after just 20 years. Its life was one long decline, till it was rescued from oblivion by a new awareness of our heritage at the Millennium and the rise of the independence movement. Canals, like walls, can be powerful political statements.



The RNLi warned of dangers of Cramond Island – Queensferry RNLi rescued 66 casualties from Cramond in the first half of 2023, with just under half of those rescued in June alone.
PHOTO Alan Simpson Photography