

Letter from Scotland

John
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It's unsettling, living in a leap year. And as we approach that extra day, February 29th, I feel a slight sea-sickness coming on. Is the world really leaping up and down, or is it just me? We have elections, referendums, budgets, fiscal frameworks, industries in crisis, parties falling apart, strange characters taking sides, all floating past on a full moon tide.

I've been looking up why we have this extra day. It transpires that the Earth goes round the Sun, not in 365 days, as I'd fondly imagined, but in 365 days and six hours. So every four years we have to add a day so we don't get ahead. But to be even more awkward, the scientists tell us that it's actually 365 days, five hours and 49 minutes and 16 seconds. This unhelpful shortfall adds up to, roughly, three days every 400 years. So every 400 years, the 29th of February has to be removed from our leap years, though that won't bother me since the next time that will happen is 2100.



I don't know anyone who was born on the 29th February but I can imagine it would be awkward. In law, such an unfortunate person has to wait till 1st March to become a year older – unless it's a “normal” leap year – and this could be frustrating if you are waiting to be married, get a driving licence, vote, sign a contract, end an apprenticeship etc. And if you have ever seen a production of “The Pirates of Penzance” you will know how awkward that can be. In New Zealand, they let you jump the gun on the 28th, one of the many advantages of living in a young country.

But back to this old country and our unsettling leap year. After months of haggling, we finally have an agreement between the Westminster government and the Scottish Government on that “fiscal framework”, the deal over Scotland's reduced block grant when income tax is devolved later this year. The SNP also got their £30.4bn budget through parliament. So the decks have been cleared for the general election on May 5th.

Or so we thought, till the Conservative Party got us into this unholy mess over Europe. Now we have a referendum campaign on top of an election campaign. David Cameron must now regret having appeased his euro-sceptics two years ago by promising an “in-or-out” referendum.

He's gone through a gruelling few months “re-negotiating” Britain's membership of the EU, only to find that more than a hundred of his backbenchers and a quarter of his cabinet are still anti-Europe. His party is falling apart before our eyes.

It's perhaps no surprise that the two leading wreckers are journalists. The shambolic wild beast that is Boris Johnson just can't resist a bit of campaigning fun.

And Michael Gove has always been a fish out of water, gasping for air when he was sacked for introducing madcap reforms in English education – despite the fact he's never been a teacher and he's not English but Scottish. Now, as the splendidly robed Attorney General (though he's never been a lawyer), he presumes to tell us that the Prime Minister's agreement with EU leaders is not legally binding. Gilbert and Sullivan would have fun with these two “Pirates of Westminster.” Here in Scotland, Margaret Mitchell MSP has become the first Tory to break ranks and join the “Leave” campaign.

Political breakdown

It's unsettling how so much of our political system is breaking down. The Labour Party is not exactly a united red

army and the Liberal Democrats and the Greens just can't break through the 10 per cent barrier in the opinion polls. Outsiders and anti-politics campaigners seem to flourish in the winter sun. Different issues overlap and obscure each other, like immigration and the EU, welfare and work, taxation and spending.

Much of what the main parties offer is gesture politics because the real thing is too shocking. The SNP say they are opposing Westminster "austerity" but they won't put up taxes to pay for more public spending. Labour and the Liberal Democrats say they would raise income tax by a penny in Scotland, but that only reduces "austerity" by a third.

Local councils, now setting their budgets, are complaining they have been short-changed by £350m and the result will be cuts to local services and between 8,000 and 15,000 jobs lost.

Oil and Gas

Other things fall apart. We had a report out this week from the leaders of the Scottish oil and gas industry warning that they are standing on the "edge of a chasm" of low investment, hardly any new exploration and further job losses. Already 65,000 jobs have gone as a result of the slump in oil prices from \$110 a barrel to just \$30. It's been caused by a strange combination of a world-wide recession, and the Arabians, Iranians, Russians, Venezuelans and the US frackers are all pumping out oil and gas in a mad poker game for market share.

This week we got another sharp warning about our diet. Members of Obesity Action Scotland, say we've made virtually no progress on the 2010 master plan to improve the nation's health. An embarrassing 65 per cent of us adults are overweight and, even more worrying, so are 30 per cent of children. OAS is calling for a sugar tax, better labelling of food products, and restrictions on marketing and promotions.

Ebola

And finally to a brave lady whose poor health is none of her own doing. Pauline Cafferkey, the nurse from Lanarkshire who went out to Sierra Leone in 2014 to help with the Ebola crisis, has been admitted to a specialist hospital in London for the third time.

At one point, shortly after she came home, she was said to be close to death with the initial infection. She apparently made a full recovery but then in October last year she went down with meningitis. Now she is ill again with yet another complication. It seems the Ebola virus can linger in remote parts of the body even after patients recover from the main infection. Doctors say it's much more complex virus than at first thought.

What's true of Ebola seems to be true of so much in this awkward leap year. Let's hope that when things fall apart, they re-assemble themselves in a happier form in the future.