

Gordon Craigie



An independent mind...

This month, I'm thinking again about how good it would be to live in a normal country...

THIS YEAR, I was really looking forward to a summer of switching off from constantly thinking about Scottish politics but, alas, that plan only lasted until we boarded the ferry to Amsterdam and heard that Rishi Sunak had called an election! Thankfully, as that news was not entirely unexpected, we had made arrangements for a proxy vote to be in place if required – we'd also done the same in case a Holyrood election was called while we were away, because I'm always still irrationally optimistic that the SNP may act boldly and decisively in pursuit of achieving its *raison d'être*, the restoration of Scotland's independence...

Anyway, we all know what happened next. The SNP did not act boldly or

decisively and – despite the FM's claim that independence would be on page 1, line 1 of the manifesto – instead proceeded to run a lacklustre campaign that rarely mentioned independence. The result? More than half a million previous SNP voters decided to stay at home and therefore the Labour candidates simply sneaked into the gap created. Whatever we may think of the SNP currently, this result was not good for Scotland, and this emboldened Labour government is already proving to be – as most of us anticipated – equally as corrupt as the previous mob. Red or blue, Tories gonna be Tories!

But, hurtful as that all is, let's leave it aside and return to those hazy, lazy days of summer, and that ill-fated plan not to obsess with Scotland and its politics. Driving through Netherlands and Germany, many things caught my eye and made me think of how differently they appear to do things – it looks to me like being a normal country with full control of your policies and economic levers allows you to achieve things that we can only dream of.

As an example, take the road systems. When we first started driving through Germany around 15 years ago, we were amazed at how good the motorways were in comparison to ours – a much more extensive and interconnected network with really good surfaces. Then, in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, the German government initiated a huge project to upgrade pretty much the entire network – where there were two lanes they increased to three or four, where there were already three lanes they increased to four. They built new, massive, truck areas to accommodate the incredible number of lorries that distribute goods all over Europe 24/7/365. The fact that these infrastructure projects are still going on now is testament to the sheer scale of the operation and, frustrating though the inevitable delays are, you can see the progress year-on-year and it is really, really impressive.

The Germans have form with this kind of investment of course, as it's exactly what they did to build, or rebuild, their motorway network after the devastation of the Second World War. It's the classic Keynesian economics of deficit financing – the government spends money not only to improve the infrastructure but to generate employment and economic activity. To build roads you



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Germany combines wind, solar, and agriculture



Netherland's biggest wind park – offshore



need workers, the workers spend their wages in the shops and pay taxes, the shops and businesses flourish, pay taxes, and create more employment opportunities, and so it goes on. What's the opposite of this approach? Monetarism and Neoliberalism, as adopted by Thatcher and enthusiastically embraced by all UK governments since. This is not working for us, the people, as our public services and standard of living are getting constantly eroded while, as ever, the rich get richer aided and abetted by the cronyism of the British Establishment. Thatcherism/ Blairism/Starmerism = Austerity!

And it's not just Germany, Netherlands has an equally enviable motorway system. By the way, it's not just the motorway systems that are impressive in these countries, the single-track country roads are equally smooth and well-maintained. I have never, ever, encountered a pothole – maybe some exist, somewhere, but I've honestly never seen one! Anyway, as we drove on the incredibly smooth five-lane motorway past Amsterdam towards the return ferry I couldn't help myself thinking ahead to what awaited us on the A1 from Newcastle to Edinburgh, single-lane interspersed with the occasional dual-carriageway stretch – and this is the main east coast artery between Scotland and England! There's enough of a saga going on in Scotland around dualling the A9, never mind addressing the embarrassment of the A1, and it's equally clear that successive English governments are uninterested in upgrading the A1 for their own population in "the north" – they're certainly not going to do anything that helps us heathens further north of their "north"!

Topically for us, there's another example of different approaches to renewable energy. While our resources are being plundered, again, for the benefit of England, the scale of investment in wind and solar energy in both Germany and Netherlands is massive and, no doubt, actually benefiting their own citizens. As a snapshot from the views afforded from the motorways, Germany is steadily increasing the number of wind turbines and solar farms while Netherlands appears to be going all-in on solar – they do, however, have a massive offshore wind farm that can be seen from the ferry. I was also told recently that German farmers had discovered that some of the crops they grow, notably hops, thrive if they're protected from the fiercest of the summer sunshine so they came up with the novel solution of growing the crops underneath elevated solar panels, thus getting the win-win of better crop yields and cheap, green energy!

So, better roads, better housing, cleaner and cheaper energy – all things that we can only look at and weep in Scotland's current colonised state. Oh, and it's also evident on these journeys that both Germany and Netherlands are countries that still manufacture things – car giants like BMW, Audi, Mercedes, and Opel, Varta batteries, Osram light bulbs – just a few examples that stick in the mind that are visible from the motorway. Meanwhile, Scotland's only oil refinery at Grangemouth appears to be hurtling towards

the same fate as our coal, steel, shipbuilding, and car manufacturing – maybe it's time for The Proclaimers to update the lyrics in *Letter from America*!

Clearly, I never managed to switch off from our political conundrums as I'd intended this summer, but these are only a few random observations of things that are achievable in normal, independent countries – I'll save the deeper analysis for issue 100 of your award-winning *iScot Magazine* next month! Independence? I still believe that "it's coming yet, for a' that" – there's that irrational optimism again! – but this interminable wait to become a normal country again is gey wearying... don't you agree?

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