

*Letter from Sutherland.*

## AFTER INDEPENDENCE, EMBO OLYMPICS

It was the fundraising idea of the year. It caught the attention of a normally cynical media, fired a countrywide enthusiasm and put the small seaside village of Embo, 300 population, firmly on the map.

On July, 16th last year Embo shot to fame with its bold declaration of independence from the rest of the United Kingdom. Now, like Topsy, the original, brilliantly simple idea has grown and grown until the line between fact and fiction has become slightly smudged. Fantasy rules again this month with the opening of the Embo Parliament while later in the summer — on the first anniversary of Independence Day — Embo is to hold its own Olympic Games.

The ingenious imaginations behind the creation of the Free State are those of Donald Ward (Prime Minister); sisters Liz and Christine Gill (Minister for Internal affairs and Foreign Ambassador respectively) and Jeanette McGrath (Minister of Drink). They took the concept of independence and embellished it to envelop a clever imaginary world.

Liz, who works for the Forestry Commission when she is not grappling with complicated internal affairs, admits that along with her fellow Ministers, she is hugely enjoying her sudden elevation to power. But, she says, they did not at first realise the startling effect their

fundraising plot would have on the rest of the country.

"We were sitting around talking about ideas for fundraising when Christine mentioned a highway robbery she has seen performed for charity while on holiday in Canada. We all thought a robbery would not be quite so appropriate for this area but from this point we gradually developed the independence idea. We felt it was a good scheme but did not realise just how good until we started getting press and radio interest. If we had known it was going to generate so much enthusiasm, then we would have capitalised more on it. But, at the time, we just did not know what we had."

However, Liz and her colleagues quickly realised the potential of idea. In the weeks leading up to Independence Day, which was scheduled to exploit the Glasgow Fair trade, they cleverly kindled the interest of the media to make Embo — a name hitherto unknown outside geography books, and not all of those, the focus of attention. Much mileage was made from a letter to the Queen asking her permission to break from the rest of the country — she replied graciously with the proviso that it was only for the day.

The press coverage worked will. Holidaymakers at Embo's cutely named Grannies Hielan' Hame Caravan Site extended their stay to include Independence Day. Other

caravanners and campers put forward their holidays to be there on 16th July, and visitors from all over the country headed for Embo to join in the fun. One intrepid family even drove all the way from Cornwall just for the day.

A customs post was set up at the end of the whin lined road leading to the windswept village. Visitors in and out were charged a tax (sweetened by the promise of a free dram courtesy of clynelish Distillery, Brora). Regular border patrols dealt harshly with those trying to evade the tax. Some wily visitors tried to con their way past the customs post.

"A few people had CD plates on their car and were claiming diplomatic immunity," remembers Liz. "Others said they were from the Royal Mint and demanded to know exactly what was going on. People really entered into the spirit of it and played along. We have had people since the event coming off the beaten track just to see Embo and to say that they have been here."

Independence Day ended in a riotous party at Grannies Bar (the only pub in Embo, the centre of village life and owned by the local laird). The fact that the fundraisers were £2,500 to the good for Embo Community Centre funds added to the general jubilation.

Since the things have been strangely quiet down in the Free State. But not for much longer. The Embo Cabinet have been putting their

heads together to dream up more frolics for 1989 and have finally made public the result of a winter's hard work.

The first session of the recently created Embo Parliament opens in Grannies Bar on Saturday, 25th March. The (real) Chancellor of the Exchequer Mr Nigel Lawson has been invited to address the Embo subjects on the day. No answer has yet been received.

Performing the opening ceremony will be the Free State's own Prime Minister, Donald Ward. A civil servant, he has been posted to Edinburgh since Independence Day, but retains his top government position and is up in East Sutherland at least once a month to ensure the smooth running of his bit of land.

Co-inciding with the first parliamentary sitting will be the launch of Embo's own currency, the the Cuddie. Similar to a £5 note, but worth 50p, the Cuddie depicts Clynelish Distillery on the front and on the back the fish from which the money takes its name. The note is in the colours of the Embo flag (red, yellow and blue). Minister for Internal affairs, Liz, says every effort has been made to make the currency as realistic as possible.

"It will be legal tender in the Independent State of Embo. A minimum donation of 50p will ensure one cuddie. There will only be a limited edition of cuddies and we are

hoping people will treat them as a collector's item."

The opening parliamentary session looks set to be as popular as Independence Day, Say Liz:—"Letters have come from all over expressing an interest in the occasion.

We had one letter from a lady in Bathgate who wants to be an M.P. We have written back and said there is a position in the Embo Army or border patrol duties!"

The next big occasion on the Free State's calendar is the Olympic Games to be staged on 16th July when the emphasis will not be so much on winning but on having fun both for spectators and participants. Liz explains the reasoning behind the event. "We are having competitors representing different countries. The countries were chosen on the basis that their flag has the same colours as the Embo flag. We've written to the embassies of the countries chosen and asked for permission to let one of the competitors represent their country and we've also asked them to send in a flag. The letters have been out a fortnight now and so far Spain and the Phillipines have replied favourably."

Parliament and the Olympic Games aside, Liz and the rest of the ministerial team are not short of future fundraising plans. The Independent State of Embo continues to flourish and is ready to play a much bigger part on the world stage.