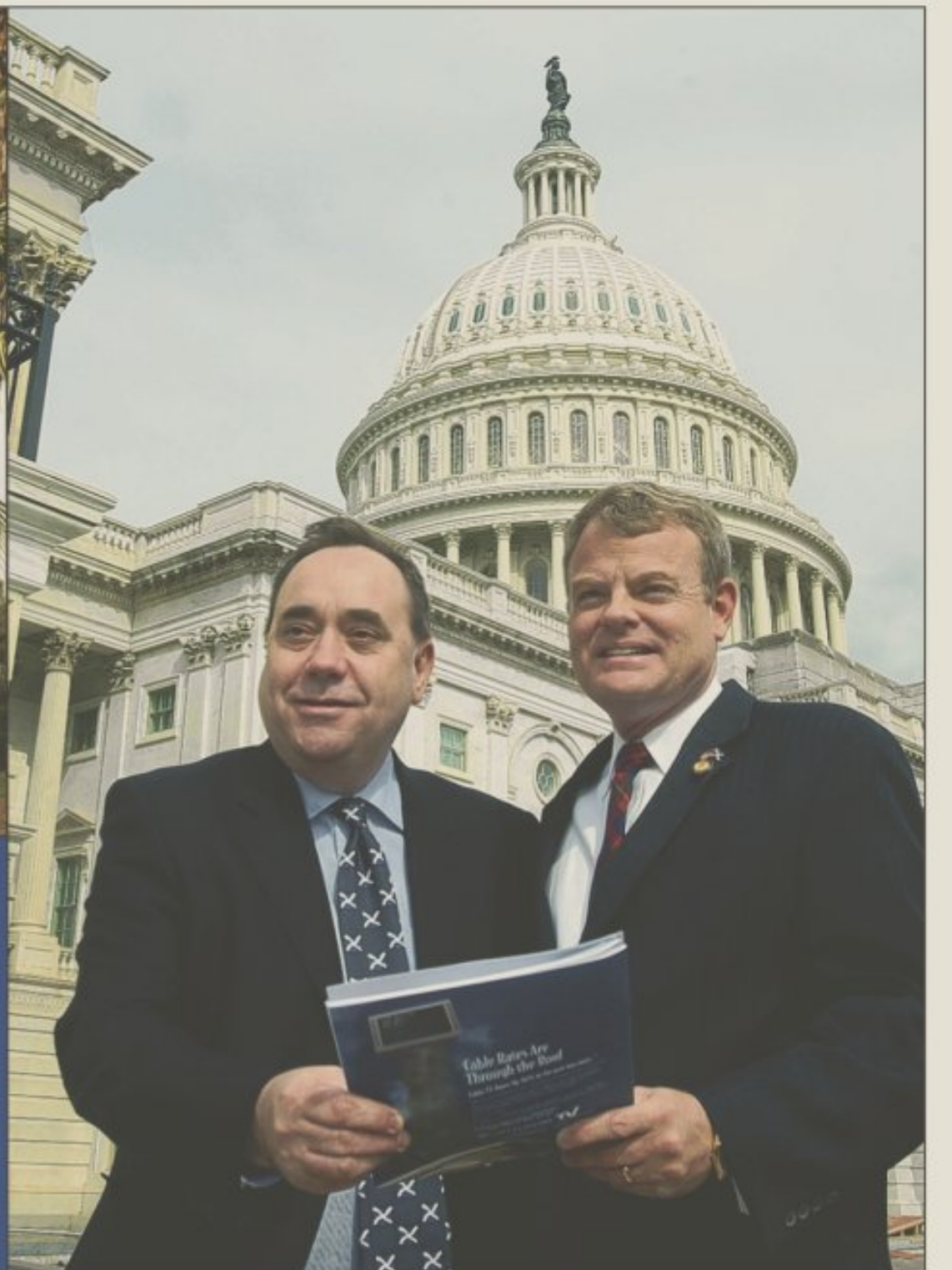




Mike MacFarlane will fly in from California for the clan gathering; Salmond visited Capitol Hill to lobby Scots like congressman McIntyre, right



Scots bank on a clantastic 2009

Homecoming will see the greatest gathering of emigrant Scots since 1822 – but will the natives join in? Gillian Bowditch reports

To celebrate 25 years of marriage, Michael McIntyre, the US congressman from North Carolina and senior whip for the Democrats, retook his wedding vows – an increasingly fashionable practice in the God-fearing South. For McIntyre, though, the ceremony was as much about connecting with his roots as with his wife.

A founder member of the Scots-American caucus on Capitol Hill, McIntyre travelled last August to the tiny church on the Island of Lismore, Argyll, where his great-great-grandparents married in 1820. "It was," he said, "a great odyssey for me."

It is an odyssey Alex Salmond is hoping more people will make. The first minister is throwing his weight behind Homecoming Scotland 2009, a legacy of Jack McConnell's Labour government that chimes with Salmond's kilted ambitions for the nation. The year-long celebration, which coincides with the 250th anniversary of the birth of Robert Burns, aims to attract the Scottish diaspora and "affinity Scots" back to the auld country for some high-profile events.

The highlight of the £5m jamboree, which starts on Burn's Night and ends on St Andrew's Day, will be The Gathering 2009 – the biggest clan get-together in Edinburgh since Sir Walter Scott's Pageant of 1822 – culminating in a parade up the Royal Mile and "a Pageant of the Clans" on Edinburgh Castle Esplanade.

Holyrood Park will host the world's biggest Highland Games, featuring 2,000 competitors and performers, from pipers and dancers to hammer-throwers and tug-o-war teams. There will be a food and drink fair, an exhibition on tracing your ancestry and a live music stage, featuring contemporary and traditional bands.

According to Lord Sempill, chief of the name and arms of Sempill and

vice-convenor of the Standing Council of Scottish Chiefs, who is directing the event, at least 80 clans will be represented. Among them will be Michael MacFarlane, the California-based president of the MacFarlane Society. "This is an important event to unite Scots," he said. "We are holding our annual Clan MacFarlane world gathering in conjunction with this event."

Strenuous efforts are also being made to ensure Prince Charles shows up; as Lord of the Isles he has agreed to be its patron.

For most of 2009, Scots at home and abroad will be urged to connect with their inner haggis. The most high-profile Scot in America may be Groundskeeper Willie, the aggressive, alcoholic, xenophobic janitor from the Simpsons, according to a poll commissioned by the Scottish government last year, but this has not dampened American enthusiasm for the land of Burns and whisky.

Janet Robertson, a travel agent in California originally from Broxburn in West Lothian, says Homecoming and in particular The Gathering 2009 have generated huge interest on the West Coast of America, where even small towns can attract crowds of 40,000 to their Highland Games. "They are desperate to be part of it. I've got one woman doing two jobs to pay for her brother to come over with her because he can't afford the fare. It's a very important trip for people."

For Robertson, the main challenge will be getting the weaponry through airport security. "There is a big Celtic rock music scene here," she says. "Even at the Highland Games, you tend to see people dressed up in so much armour, it terrifies the life out of me. I think they have watched Highlander once too often. I've yet to get through to them that in Scotland we don't dress up like Ninja Turtles."



On America's West Coast, even the smaller towns can attract crowds of up to 40,000 to their Highland Games

A range of other Homecoming Scotland events will be unveiled in the spring to coincide with Tartan Week in New York, an event that will be renamed Scotland Week and widened to reflect the economic ambitions of the SNP government.

Golf events will be themed round the Open at Turnberry in 2009. Every Scottish school child will be encouraged to write to friends abroad inviting them to Scotland. Plans are also afoot to theme the Edinburgh Festival around Homecoming, and new works on the subject are being commissioned. Prominent emigrant Scots such as Dario Franchetti, the racing driver, and John Barrowman, the actor, are being recruited for an "I'm coming home in 2009" marketing campaign. So far about 100 Scottish groups have applied for grants of up to £50,000 to stage or enhance existing events.

The economic and political stakes could not be higher. For Salmond, capitalising on a resurgence of Scottish pride, Homecoming Scotland is a chance to showcase the nation in the run-up to the Holyrood election, and to persuade Scots that an SNP-led Scotland has the international clout and economic panache to make a success of independence.

There is also a risk, however, that Homecoming will be seen as national celebration by default, a cross between Brigadoon and a Soviet-style massed parade. After a slow start, respon-

sibility for delivering Homecoming Scotland 2009 has been devolved to VisitScotland and EventScotland. Any failure to pull it off could tarnish the image of Scotland abroad and set back Salmond's cherished goal of independence.

"It will be tough," says Peter Lederer, chairman of VisitScotland. "It is on track, but we have to set realistic expectations. For me, Homecoming Scotland is about laying a good foundation to build on. It is something we could do every decade."

The SNP wants tourism in Scotland to expand by 50% by 2015, a figure that Philip Riddle, chief executive of VisitScotland, has warned is unachievable without a dramatic improvement in skills, motivation and year-round attractions. Jim Mather, minister for enterprise, energy and tourism, is counting on the McIntyre effect to help boost the figures.

"It's about connecting with the diaspora and waking up to the fact we've got this huge asset working for us and with us," he says.

Mather believes the time is ripe for this tartan revolution. According to research by the charity The Scotland Funds, 50% more Americans are now classifying themselves as Scots-Americans than did so a decade ago.

Research by Tom Devine, the Sir William Fraser professor of Scottish history at Edinburgh University, indicates that 50m people internationally now claim Scottish descent.

He is in the process of launching the Scottish Centre for Diaspora Studies, a faculty dedicated to studying the migration of Scots and their influence on the countries in which they have settled.

"If you are third or fourth generation, you have a plethora of great-grandparents to choose from," says Mather. "But they seem to be choosing the Scot." He puts the sudden fashion for Scottish roots down to "Tartan Day, the parliament or even Mr Gibson's movie", but he believes these influences tap into "a solid base" of what it means to be Scottish.

While few can argue with the aims of boosting the economy and enhancing the nation's image, some fear Homecoming Scotland will be hijacked for political ends.

"I am interested in anything that helps the cause of independence," says Mather. "Why have we not been making more of the diaspora and getting them involved? Look at the influence they have had on the Irish economy, confidence and wellbeing. Ireland had a population of 2.8m in 1975. It's now sitting at 4.4m, and the forecast by 2020 is 5.5m. A lot of that growth is coming from third- and fourth-generation Irish wanting to return home."

Sempill says: "There has to be a political dimension. Scotland today is dramatically different to 20 years ago. Part of that difference is political and comes from the Scottish parliament. The Nationalists are far more aware of the connection with the diaspora and the value of that connection than those in other parties."

"The main reason for doing Homecoming Scotland is economic. The secondary factor is boosting national pride and confidence."

Paul Bush, chief operating officer of EventScotland and the man charged with making the year a success, says Homecoming Scotland is set to deliver £40m for the Scottish economy. "It is ambitious, but we wouldn't have set that target if we didn't think we could achieve it," he says. "It's comparable with the sort of level of return we would expect from other programmes we have managed. It's not a figure we've plucked out of the air. We are confident we can do it."

Sempill, who spent much of 2007 travelling in North America, Australia and New Zealand promoting The Gathering 2009 to Scottish associations, says his reception has been enthusiastic. "The big challenge is turning that positive reception into people buying into the event in July 2009," he says.

Critics point to the inability of the government to translate the cultural successes of Tartan Week into significant economic benefits. According to Devine, many Scots-Americans have concerns about Scotland's leftist tendencies and believe that the state has too big a role in society. It is the reason, he says, that institutions such as government and universities have failed to open the purse strings of the Scottish-American community with its vast wealth.

Lederer believes Tartan Week has now run its course and should be given a much wider remit. "It needs to step up a gear and sell the whole of Scotland, not just the cultural bit. It should be a Scotland in America week and showcase everything from universities to the financial-services sector. It needs to be an economic rather than a tourism vehicle."

Mather says American entrepreneurs already see Scotland as the new Dublin. One American who recently visited said: "If you wished you'd invested in Ireland in 1987, you should be investing in Scotland now."

"You only have to compare the cost of an acre of land in Co Wexford with an acre of land in Kintyre to see the opportunity," says Mather, who is urging all Scots to "break out the Basildon Bond" and tell their relatives to come home in 2009.

For every American who sees Scotland as the new Dublin, however, there are half a dozen who see it as the new Albania. One survey showed a high proportion of Americans do not believe the country has electricity or running water. The Braveheart effect, it seems, cuts both ways.

"People have a very romantic view of what Scotland is like," says Robertson. "I was queuing in California to get Scottish meat pies and overheard one group saying about Homecoming: 'We can go over and help them take the country back'."

According to Sempill, though, Scots have to thank the diaspora for keeping so many aspects of their heritage alive. "Scotland went very cold on its heritage," he says. "That has all changed. We have a much more positive attitude to our connections with our past. But if it hadn't been for the clan associations overseas, the whole clan system would have withered on the vine."

He has some sympathy, however, with academics and historians who are suspicious of the artifice and invention that surrounds much of Scotland's "heritage".

"I think the historians are right," says Sempill. "If you look at it carefully, it's not a pretty picture. There was a lot of infighting around the clans. It was quite cliquey. Most of the history of the clans shows them to be fairly brutal. But within the clan system overseas is this strong tradition of community and the desire to belong. The emotion is genuine. They consider Scotland to be part of their fabric and their make-up, even four or five generations down the line. It's bordering on the bizarre and we are very lucky to have it."

In his 1992 book Tribes: How Race, Religion and Identity Determine Success in the New Global Economy, Joel Kotkin examines the dynamic link between cultures and wealth. He argues that tribal rather than political affiliations or even national boundaries are the future indicators of economic growth in a world where populations are peripatetic. If he is right, the re-emergence of the clans could be of huge potential economic benefit to Scotland.

At home, however, the clan system is seen as fusty and irrelevant, but then Scotland has long had an uneasy relationship with its icons. In a struggle to find its place in the modern world, the nation threw off its White Heather Club reputation and set about distancing itself from bagpipes and haggis. Mather believes the time is ripe to reconnect with these icons and exploit their economic potential.

"There is a lot of space in the Scottish soul for romanticism," he says. "I think people enjoy it. It gets us thinking about our values and the values of the past. I'm all for it."

For Lederer, it is not lack of enthusiasm abroad but ambivalence at home that could dampen the success of Homecoming.

"This is about Scotland celebrating its heritage," he says. "Scotland is perceived so much more positively abroad than we see ourselves. I don't have a problem selling Scotland abroad, but I do sometimes have a problem selling Scotland to the Scots."

For more information: www.homecomingscotland.com www.clangathering.org



Lederer sounds a cautious note

People are just so excited about coming home, and desperate to be part of it

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