

Letter from Scotland

Nicola Sturgeon's eleven are hoping to win the Independence World Cup, or at least to take Scotland into the top ten small countries in the world. It's been reshuffle week in the government here. And it's been difficult to stay cool about it, with the highest June temperatures for over 20 years.



So while the rest of us were enjoying warm, dry days with almost cloudless blue skies, (in Glasgow the temperature reached 32 degrees Celsius) the First Minister was planning to refresh her team, most of whom had been in the same job for several years. Half the cabinet has been replaced and “new talent” has been brought into the squad of 15 junior ministers. Their job will be to breathe new fire (being careful not to set the heather alight in this dry weather) into the administration, solve some of its mounting problems, and prepare for the next election and, possibly another referendum on independence.

The biggest loss is the health secretary, Shona Robison, a close friend of Ms Sturgeon. She actually resigned for

personal reasons, rather than being sacked, but she was being blamed for recent failings in the NHS. Unfairly, in my view, since the basic problem is a lack of funding and increasing expectations. Only a few days ago she managed to offer nurses and other low-paid staff a 9 per cent pay rise over the next three years.

The other notable departure is Keith Brown, only recently elected deputy leader of the SNP. He is leaving his post as Economy Secretary to concentrate on party campaigning and election planning. Another sign of battle preparation is the promotion of the old warhorse Mike Russell to full cabinet status as "Secretary for Government Business and Constitutional Relations", in other words fighting the good fight over Brexit, exploiting the shambles at Westminster for independence purposes at home.

Humza Yousaf, who has been an unusually competent Transport Minister, gains promotion to be Secretary for Justice. His job will be to rescue Police Scotland from its troubles over senior management and computer and call centre problems. He's the first Asian to enter the Scottish Cabinet.

Several women gain promotion. Jeane Freeman takes on the challenge of the Health portfolio. Shirley-Anne Somerville will be in charge of establishing the new department of Social Security, just as Scotland gains more responsibilities for welfare benefits. And Aileen Campbell becomes Secretary for Local Government, with a special focus on tackling poverty. More than half the cabinet are now women.

One woman who may not make it into the junior ranks is Gillian Martin. Soon after her appointment as a junior Education Minister was announced, someone dug up an embarrassing blog she'd written more than a decade ago containing insulting remarks about transgender people. She didn't really mean them of course but that was probably the end of her ministerial career, although the First Minister said in parliament she was

still considering the appointment. Harsh, but a lesson for us all in taking care in what we write.

Some old stagers remain, notably Fergus Ewing, Secretary for Rural Affairs, Roseanna Cunningham Secretary for the Environment, Fiona Hyslop as Culture Secretary and John Swinney as education secretary, despite having to climb down this week over his plans for a new education bill to give headteachers more powers.

Overall, the SNP government has remained surprisingly stable, despite having to pass on Westminster budget cuts and increase taxes, and despite the various missed targets in health and education. The party still leads the opinion polls with an approval rating of about 40 per cent and support for independence is holding steady at around 45 per cent.

The government shake-up comes at the end of term. Holidays beckon for everyone. 688,959 school pupils are free for the summer. In the next few days 60,000 students will emerge from graduation halls, throwing their caps in the air. And the sun continues to shine. They'll be selling out of ice cream at this weekend's 30th annual Game Fair at Scone Palace in Perthshire.

Countryside rangers have been warning us about starting wildfires. Like the one in West Lothian where a large area of woodland has been destroyed near the village of Fauldhouse. The staff at Cairngorm National Park appealed for visitors not to light barbecues. Tarmac melted on roads in Aberdeenshire. The roof of the Science Centre in Glasgow began dripping "goo" (a scientific term for "pitch"). Train services across Central Scotland ran slowly as speed limits were placed on over-heated tracks.

As I said, we are losing our cool.

Finally, we've had another flag story this week. Apparently

the Scotland Office at Dover House in London has been flying the red and white St George's Cross from its flagpole on the days when England is playing in the World Cup, like that less than thrilling pass-back game against Belgium on Thursday evening.

But, according to the Scottish Secretary David Mundell (Westminster's secretary for Scotland) the deal is that, in return, all government offices in London will fly the Scottish saltire when Scotland is playing in the World Cup in 2022!

I wonder if the Sturgeon eleven will still be around.