

Letter from Scotland

I was surprised to come across so many Pictish stones on a recent cycling tour around the Cromarty Firth. But apparently there are some 350 such memorials of our Iron Age ancestors strewn along the east side of Scotland.

Viewed from the Oil Age they seem mystical, child-like, other worldly. And yet they are the remnants of a civilisation that lasted for centuries, building brocks and crannogs, hunting and harvesting, forging fine metalwork, winning battles, like Dun Nechtain in 685 and Athelstaneford in 832 where the Saltire flag was first flown.



What would the Picts have made of it all ?

This week the Cromarty Firth was the scene of a modern battle, between the Oil Age and the Age of Green Energy. Environmental campaigners climbed onto an oil rig, preventing it being towed out into the North Sea.

The would-be saboteurs, from Greenpeace, have been pointing

out that while parliament has declared a climate change emergency, companies like BP are continuing to drill for oil.

We learned from official figures on Tuesday that Scotland has missed its emissions reduction target for the second year in row. The government maintains that carbon emissions are falling, by 3 per cent a year, but it's just not enough to meet the target.

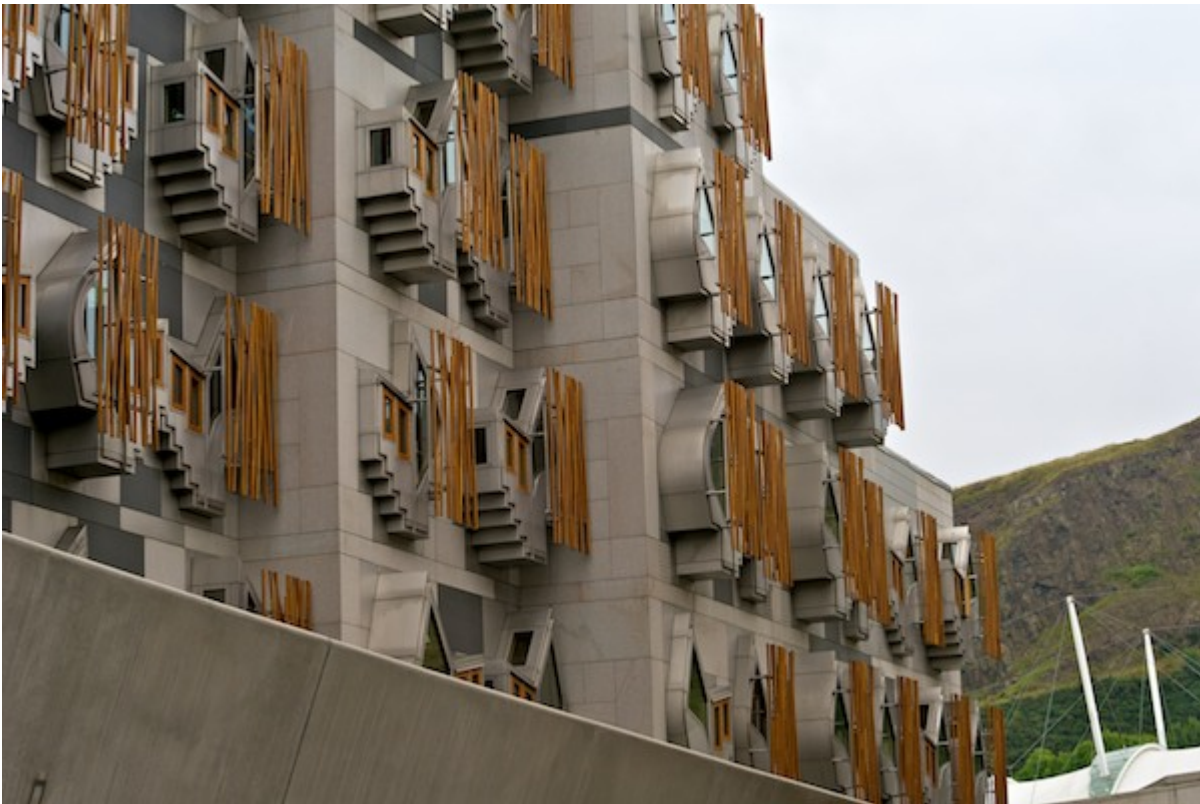
As we struggle to move on from the Oil Age, I guess the Picts had an equally bumpy ride from their Iron Age into the Roman Age. Times change. But they are changing ever more quickly, even on big issues like climate, migration, and world trade.

How small, in the face of all this, is what passes as the main news of this week, the Conservative leadership race. I wonder what a Pictish newspaper, if there was one, would make of this. Nicola Sturgeon has called it "a horror show" in which all ten candidates are striving to take Scotland out of the European Union against its will. The First Minister went to Brussels mid-week to reassure EU officials that all this Brexit nonsense is Westminster's doing not Scotland's.

Take immigration for instance. Without migrants coming to Scotland, our population would be in decline. The National Records Office published figures this week which showed that the number of babies born in the first three months of this year, 12,642, was the second lowest since records began in 1855.

Employment is at a record high, unemployment is low at 3.3 per cent, so without the 223,000 EU citizens living in Scotland we wouldn't be able to take in the harvest, or staff our hospitals, care homes, restaurants or hotels. Yet, according

to a study by Robert Gordon University, talk of Brexit is making an increasing number of them feel unwelcome.



When MSPs at Holyrood were not watching the “horror show”, they were debating two important issues this week. They passed a bill which, hopefully, will make organ transplants a little easier. They have followed Wales and England in introducing “presumed consent” to the system for organ donation. Instead of opting-in to donate your organs after death, you will have to opt out, although the wishes of relatives will still be taken into account.



Green MSPs support the bill introduced by their colleague Mark Ruskell outside Holyrood on 11 June 2019
MSPs did not however agree to a Green Party proposal to make 20mph the maximum speed limit on minor roads in towns and cities. It's still up to local councils to designate 20 mph zones in every street they feel should have slower traffic.

Last Sunday afternoon, many of us were watching, with pride, our national women's football team competing in the World Cup in France. We were drawn against the mighty England, as chance would have it. We went down 2 – 1 but England was lucky to win a penalty and, overall, it was a good match with two well taken goals and a lot of entertaining football.

Another woman going into the history books this week is Jenny Graham from Inverness. She's just beaten the women's record for cycling round the world by 20 days. She did the 18,000 mile trip, unsupported, in 124 days, averaging 156 miles a day.

Alas tragedy overtook another women adventurer. Isobel Bytautas from Selkirk was killed by lightning as she was climbing a mountain south of Fort William. Her party of seven were caught in a thunderstorm near the summit of Na Gruagaichean (the maidens) last Saturday afternoon. Another woman had to be treated in hospital. We don't get a lot of lightning in Scotland. The chances of being hit are put at 10 million to one, though a 12 year old boy was badly burnt by lightning on Schiehallion in 2017.

Finally, from tragedy to farce, though it could be dangerous. A fish war has broken out between Irish and Scottish trawlers over the disputed waters around a rock in the Atlantic called, appropriately, Rockall. It sounds like a plot from Gilbert & Sullivan but both countries claim sovereignty over this tiny uninhabitable rock 240 miles out in the Atlantic. Both governments are trying to pour oil on the troubled waters, saying a diplomatic solution will be found.

The solution is, of course, the EU's Common Fisheries Policy. But we daren't mention that. I wonder what the Conservative leadership contenders would think about a Rockall "backstop".

In the distance, over the centuries, I can hear the Picts laughing at us.