

# Letter from Scotland

As if to show us that Nature is still in charge, our winter storms have humbled our most mighty infrastructure project of recent years, The Queensferry Crossing.

The £1.3bn bridge over the Firth of Forth, carrying 80,000 vehicles a day between Edinburgh and Fife, was supposed to never close.

But on Monday afternoon it did, due to lumps of ice falling from the cables, like boulders, onto the cars below. Eight cars were damaged but luckily no one was hurt.



Bridge over stormy waters

Storm Ciara brought chilly 50-80mph winds and heavy rain sweeping across much of Scotland. Rail and ferry services were

disrupted. Part of a guest house in Hawick in the Borders collapsed due to flooding. A diver was lost at sea off Oban. Four hillwalkers, totally unprepared for the severe weather, had to be rescued on Ben Nevis. And when the storm was followed by snowfalls, vehicles became stranded on the high roads of Dumfriesshire. By the end of the week we were bracing ourselves for the next storm, Storm Dennis.



But the fact that our great new bridge was put out of action by a simple build-up of ice on the cables has almost made us doubt ourselves as a nation. Why was nothing done about it when the problem was first noticed last year? Why had the designers not built in a solution? Similar bridges in Canada, the USA and Scandinavia have various methods for dealing with ice on the cables. Why couldn't traffic use the old bridge? Oh because it was closed for repairs. Why was the 34-mile detour to use the Kincardine Bridge such a clogged-up hassle?

Of course it didn't take long for the opposition parties to point out that the SNP's big project had gone wrong. The Transport Minister Michael Matheson tried to explain, with

knitted brow, that the new bridge was, overall, more reliable than the old one. This was its first closure, the only one since it opened in 2017, and the weather conditions were exceptional.

I must admit I was against building the new bridge but I have now learned to love it for its sheer beauty. I thought a better option was to refurbish the old bridge and send heavy lorries around by the Kincardine Bridge. And it has to be said that the environmentalists' prediction was correct and that building more road capacity simply adds to the traffic problem. Already the new bridge is carrying 10,000 more vehicles a day than it was designed for. Eventually, on Wednesday, The Queensferry Crossing re-opened. But we have learned that it is not invincible.

Just as one bridge was showing its weaknesses, Boris Johnson was hinting that he would cement the Union by building a bridge from Scotland to Northern Ireland. Apparently, experts are preparing a report on the project for the government which will sketch out a plan for a 20-mile crossing (half bridge, half tunnel) between Portpatrick in Galloway and Larne in County Antrim. It would only cost £20bn, a fraction of the cost of the other big Boris project this week, HS2, the high speed rail line between London and "The North", by which he means Birmingham or possibly Leeds.

The other big project on his agenda is the fight against climate change and here he has run into a little trouble with the venue of the next UN conference on the issue. It's due to be staged in Glasgow in November at the exhibition centre on the banks of the Clyde. But, again apparently, he's also been exploring an alternative venue in London so as not be up-staged by the SNP in the heroic fight against climate change. Scotland, of course, has a tougher target on phasing out carbon emissions than the rest of the UK.

Nicola Sturgeon has called for a "re-set" of relations with

Westminster after a series of differences over the COP26 conference. Boris refused to give Ms Sturgeon a formal role at the conference. He also refused to meet the policing costs which are put at an incredible £200m. In turn, The Scottish Government was accused of wanting to set up a separate Scottish stall at the Science Centre across the river from the main conference. Hopefully, the new president of COP26, the UK business secretary Alok Sharma, will do some of the “re-setting”. It wouldn’t do to have the future of Planet Earth jeopardised by a tiff between Boris and Nicola.



Prime Minister Boris Johnson on his first visit to Edinburgh at Bute House being met by First Minister Nicola Sturgeon 2 August 2019 PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter

You don’t have to dig too deeply to find other niggling differences between these two gladiators. Take drug policy for instance. The UK Government is to stage a major conference on the issue in Glasgow on 27 February 2020. But The Scottish Government has organised one in exactly the same venue the day before. Will there be differences? You bet. But you would think they could debate them at the same conference.

And in the ongoing difference over Brexit, we learned this week another answer to the question: “What has the EU ever done for us?”

In what may be one of the last grants to come to Scotland from the European Union £3.2m is to be given to the Highland Wildlife Park near Aviemore to help save our endangered species of wildcats. A breeding centre is to be set up at the park and 20 European wildcats will be released into the nearby forests every year for six years. Meanwhile, cat wardens will be deployed to capture and neuter unwanted feral cats.

So there will be a little part of the Highlands that will remain for ever European.