

Letter from Scotland

Even in the crazy world of politics, how can it be that in the middle of a pandemic and an economic disaster, and weeks away from an “independence election”, we are embroiled in a parliamentary row over an alleged conspiracy which didn’t work?

Not for the first time, in my view Scotland has disgraced itself on the world stage. We find ourselves performing a Shakespearian tragedy “full of sound and fury signifying nothing”. Or at least, signifying the falling out of the two most talented leaders of our generation, Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, for no substantial reason and with devastating consequences for their party and their dream of Scottish independence.

I blame Alex Salmond. It is a total mystery to me why, having being cleared of all sexual assault charges against him in a High Court trial, he could not let the matter rest. “Vengeance is mine,” saith the Lord. I think it’s best left that way. And shame on the opposition parties to take the matter seriously and use it as a shield to cover their lack of solutions to our many problems.



“I have never pretended to be infallible.” Pic – Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament. 03 March 2021.

For those who have not been following this sordid affair – and

I don't blame you – it has resulted in a parliamentary inquiry into Alex Salmond's allegation that there was a conspiracy to disgrace him by the leaders of the SNP, the government and the Crown Prosecution Service.

Alex Salmond, Nicola Sturgeon and Lord Wolffe have all given evidence in person. Ms Sturgeon was questioned for eight long hours during which she admitted the government had let the two complainants down but there was no conspiracy. We now await the committee's verdict. Or at least most of us do. The Conservatives have decided they've seen enough already to lay down a motion of no-confidence in the first minister and her deputy and we await the outcome of that too.

Meanwhile, Ms Sturgeon has been trying to concentrate on her day-job of battling the pandemic. "We are firmly heading in the right direction" she told parliament. Infection numbers are coming down and vaccinations numbers are going up. People are still dying – over 200 a week (last Sunday, the total stood at 9,580) but the numbers are falling. This allowed the First Minister to announce that from 15 March, older pupils will be allowed back to school, at least on a part-time basis. There is however a new alarm over the so-called Brazilian variant. Three cases have been discovered in Aberdeen and efforts are still going on to trace 34 people who flew into the city on the same plane.

There's been a general welcome for the Chancellor's extra £1.2 billion for The Scottish government in his budget this week. It will, no doubt, help the Finance Secretary Kate Forbes in her efforts to win support from the Greens to see her own budget passed in the Scottish Parliament.

But she has said Rishi Sunak's budget as a whole lacks ambition and warned: "The storm clouds of austerity are back on the horizon." She also detects a "power grab" in the UK government's increasing practice of giving direct grants to projects in Scotland and flagging them up as UK government

schemes. There was an example of it in the budget when £56m was ear-marked for “green” projects in Scotland, £27m of it going to Aberdeen’s energy transition zone for the move out of oil and gas and into off-shore wind.



Anas Sarwar who was one of the two candidates for the position of Scottish Labour Leader

The Scottish Labour Party has a new leader. As expected, Anas Sarwar won the members’ vote and immediately appointed his only rival Monica Lennon to be the party’s spokeswoman on the economy. He thus signalled an end to left/right arguments in the party and that he intends to fight the election in May on the issue of jobs and economic recovery from the pandemic. But he admits: “the task ahead of us is tough.”

In the latest opinion polls, Labour is put at 15-17 per cent support, behind the Conservatives on around 23 per cent and the SNP on about 52 per cent. The SNP are still predicted to win a majority in the Scottish Parliament but interestingly, support for independence has slipped below 50 per cent, to 46 per cent, the first time in many months. And that’s before the so-called Salmond inquiry hit the headlines.

It’s become traditional now for campaigning groups to launch their own “manifesto” ahead of an election. The latest comes from the environmental organisations, RSPB, the SWT and WWF, who are calling on the parties to commit to a “nature recovery plan”. They say that 7,000 jobs could be created restoring Scotland’s peatlands and native woodlands, culling deer numbers and establishing a new farming advisory service to help farmers transition to a low-carbon future and restore wildlife habitats.

The Scotch whisky industry has been pleading with politicians in Britain, Europe and America to sort out their row over subsidies to the aircraft manufacturing industry, so that the tit-for-tat duties on whisky exports can be lifted. And this

week, a truce was declared. Our distillers can now begin to reverse the £500m loss they have suffered from the lack of American sales over the last three years.

It's been yet another example of the crazy world of politics in which we live and for which we must all take the blame.