

Letter from Scotland

Although autumn is a season in itself, it's also a time of transition from the highs of summer to the depths of winter. And there's been much talk of transition this week. Transition out of the Covid pandemic to other health problems. Transition out of fossil fuels and into renewables. Transition out of the European Union and into Brexit's complications.

On Wednesday evening, friends who keep an allotment invited me to a meal cooked up almost entirely from the produce of their garden. We enjoyed fresh potatoes, carrots, beetroot, cabbage – Scottish salmon was the exception – and apple pie. But it wasn't long before we started talking of food shortages and price rises, fuel bills, and the darkening mood of a winter of discontent.

The Covid case numbers are still stubbornly high, at around 2,600 a day. Over 900 are in hospital and about 20 people are dying each day. What's disturbing is that a quarter of those in intensive care are under the age of 40 and the number of pregnant women affected has almost doubled. And this despite the fact that nearly 90 per cent of the population have now

been vaccinated.

The toll this is taking on the NHS and on non-Covid patients is becoming clearer all the time. The number of excess deaths is 30 per cent up on the five-year average. Nurses, doctors and ambulance crews say they are exhausted. The Royal College of Nursing has become so angry it has rejected the government's 4 per cent pay rise and is balloting its members on strike action. It says nurses deserve a 12 per cent rise.



“The redbreast whistles from a garden-croft/And gathering swallows twitter in the skies.” Ode to Autumn by John Keats.
PHOTO John Knox

There's trouble too on the railways with strike action threatening to disrupt the COP26 climate change summit in Glasgow at the beginning of November. The RMT union has joined other unions, the GMB and Unite, in demanding that proper negotiations begin on pay and conditions with the ScotRail franchise-holder Abellio or there will be a total shutdown of the rail network for the first 12 days of November. There's also a threat of strike action from bus drivers working for Stagecoach.

The Scottish Government is almost certain to intervene to avoid the embarrassment of a shutdown of public transport during an international conference on climate change. Nicola Sturgeon has been talking about the transition to a low-carbon economy at the TED Countdown Summit beamed from the EICC. She said: “We've got to be careful we don't leave people and communities behind in that transition.” She also warned against replacing Scotland's own oil and gas with imported fossil fuels. There will be slight twitching among Green Party MSPs in her joint administration over that. Is she or is she not in favour of opening up the new Cambo oil field off Shetland?



'We Are Watching', Dynamic Earth, Edinburgh, 12 October. 2021
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Environmental campaigners have been flying a [banner](#) over The Scottish Parliament this week with a large eye painted on it. They say they will be watching every move MSPs make in the promised transition to a green future.

Boris Johnson's transition out of Europe and into the great British future has not been going well this week. The shortage of lorry drivers, vets for our abattoirs, harvest workers, staff for our care homes and hotels has revealed a gap between government rhetoric and reality. And the EU has had to come to the rescue with a plan to smooth the trade route to Northern Ireland.

Scotland meanwhile seems to be making its own transition into the space age. This week an Edinburgh-based company Skyrora announced plans to launch its Skylark rocket from a new "spaceport" on the island of Unst in Shetland as early as next year. The 23-metre rocket will carry satellites into orbit and, eventually, an OTV, an orbital transfer vehicle which will service existing satellites, prepare them for re-entry and clear up some of the tonnes of debris left up there by irresponsible spacemen in the past. The rocket will also be using re-cycled plastic as fuel.



Skyrora rocket

It sounds almost too good to be true. But it's certainly better than those silly space-tourist flights by rich Star Trek fans in America. Well done to the Earl of Strathearn (Prince William) for telling them to fix the problems on Earth rather than blasting off into space.

Archaeologists in the Highlands have been bringing some perspective to our current transitions. They've been investigating what happened to Inverlael village near Ullapool. It was once a thriving community of 300 souls with

their own corn-drying kiln, a blacksmith's shop and a whisky distillery. Then came the Clearances in the 1820s when they were forced off the land by the local landowner Mackenzie of Coul. It's thought some of them emigrated to Australia where there's a farm called Inverlael.

It's worrying to think how quickly a whole way of life can change. One form of civilisation collapses and another takes its place, crofting to holiday-making, the agricultural age to the industrial age, a high carbon age to a low-carbon age.

But each year is counted by the seasons. The season of mists and fruitfulness gives way to winter and, if we're still here, to the songs of spring.