

# Letter from Scotland

Halloween is a time of scary surprises. And as I wandered through my local woods scary visions of the future emerged from the fallen leaves. Floods and fires, and my old English teacher reciting Shelley's "Ode to the West Wind".

"O wild west wind, thou breath of autumn's being/  
That from whose unseen presence the leaves dead/  
Are driven, like ghosts from an enchanter fleeing/  
Yellow and black and pale and hectic red/  
Pestilence-stricken multitudes."

There has been an air of strange, ethereal things happening this week. We have Glasgow preparing to host a gathering of 120 leaders from around the world to "save the planet" and another 25,000 delegates, plus a citizens' army of climate activists and 10,000 police to keep the peace. It conjures up images of those battle scenes from "The Lord of the Rings."

This will be the UN's 26<sup>th</sup> attempt to reach agreement on what governments must do to make our civilisation carbon-neutral by 2050. The conference has got off to a shaky start.

The host Boris Johnson says it's "touch and go" whether any

agreement will be reached. The city of Glasgow itself has only just avoided a rail strike and is still threatened with a council workers' strike. Road closures have caused traffic chaos. Room prices have soared, students have been left without flats, cruise ships have had to be chartered to provide accommodation for the police and officials.



If you do down to the woods today.....

The Queen isn't coming, nor are the presidents of Russia and China, nor is the Pope. If the planet is worth saving, you would think they would have an interest in being here. All they have to do is stand on an open-air platform for ten minutes for a photograph, hardly an extreme Covid risk. They, above all people, should know that symbolism is important.

As for the UK Government, it is still hell bent on opening another coal mine in Cumbria and a new oil field off Shetland. And the Chancellor's budget statement on Wednesday didn't mention climate change once. In fact Rishi Sunak cut air passenger duty on domestic flights, froze the planned increase in fuel duty and did everything he could to stem the rise in energy prices. He still hasn't got the message that we need to stop using so much of the earth's natural resources.

Equally surprising was his ditching of the Conservative ideology of cutting government expenditure. He has followed his Covid bail outs with more money for public services and investment, £150 billion more, a real increase of 3.8 per cent. £4.6 billion more will be coming to the Scottish government. And, to the annoyance of the SNP, an additional £170 million will by-pass The Scottish Government and be spent directly by the UK government on projects in Scotland – a new market square for Aberdeen, a by-pass for Falkirk, and refurbishments for Inverness Castle and the Burrell museum in Glasgow – and £16 million for Granton around the gasometer.



The Granton Gasholder. Photo: © 2021, Martin P. McAdam  
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What the SNP and the Labour Party have been pointing out, rather hurtfully, is that Rishi Sunak is simply making good the cuts successive Tory governments have made over the last twelve years. Even his well-meaning attempts to help the poor – tapering the phase-out of welfare benefits and increasing the national minimum wage to £9.50 an hour – have still left them struggling against an inflation rate of nearly four per cent.

The budget was billed as ushering in a new post-Covid future for Britain outside the European Union. But Covid has not gone away. New cases in Scotland remain at about 2,000 a day and 900 people are in hospital. Around 20 people with Covid are dying each week.

And Brexit problems have not gone away either. There's a new fishing dispute with France which has resulted in a Scottish registered trawler being arrested at sea and held in the port of Le Havre. It is in retaliation for the French fleet being denied access to the fishing grounds in the English Channel. It conjures up images of the "Pirates of Penzance."

The football world held a minute's silence before all the matches on Wednesday night to honour one of the game's great Scottish heroes, Walter Smith, who has died at the age of 73. Although he was manager of the national team for a spell, he's best remembered for his remarkable record as manager of Rangers. He took the team to 13 major trophies and the 2008 European cup final. It was an emotional moment when Rangers fans at Ibrox bid him a final farewell on Wednesday evening, made even more bitter-sweet when they could only manage a draw with Aberdeen.