

# Letter from Scotland

**We've been mining coal since the 13<sup>th</sup> century and, without realising it till recently, polluting the planet with its noxious fumes.**

But on Thursday morning, we finally left the Age of Coal behind us. The first minister Nicola Sturgeon pressed the button, setting off 700kg of explosives, which brought the 138 metre chimney of our last coal-fired power station tumbling to the ground.

As a young reporter on the Alloa Advertiser, the Longannet power station was always on our local horizon. Its 230 jobs, its many strikes, its coal from the labyrinth of mines around and under the River Forth, gave us an endless seam of stories. It was supplying around 40 per cent of Scotland's electricity in the 1970s and 80s, until nuclear energy, oil and gas and, finally, wind power took over. It was the third largest power station in Europe.



The Age of Coal comes to an end with the demolition of the great chimney at Longannet Power Station on the banks of the River Forth.

But by 2019, almost all of Scotland's electricity was being generated from renewable sources. The aim now is to have all

our energy needs from renewable sources by 2030. But the exit from coal has not been easy. It has meant a social revolution, which came to a head in the miners' strike of 1984/5. Again, there was an endless stream of stories for us journalists, as we witnessed the battle between the Thatcher government and the National Union of Miners. And then we watched communities collapse and big men reduced to haunted shadows.

The Scottish Parliament is about to pass legislation giving an official pardon to the 500 miners convicted of strike-related offences during those troubled times. And as she said farewell to coal at Longannet, Ms Sturgeon promised that, this time, the transition to renewables would "leave no one behind."

A "just transition" was one of the themes of the Finance Secretary's budget announced in parliament on Thursday afternoon, her first budget since the Greens joined the government. Kate Forbes is allocating £2 billion to infrastructure projects, including £830 million for "affordable", well-insulated homes to provide green jobs and de-carbonise the economy. £20 million will go immediately to the North East to help with the transition out of oil and into renewables.

She went on to announce record spending of £18 billion on health, to help make good the damage done by Covid, including £1.6bn for social care. There was £145 million to recruit more teachers and assistants to try to close the attainment gap in schools.

The end of Longannet Power Station

And on tackling child poverty, £179 million is to be spent doubling the Scottish Child Payment by April next year to £20 a week. There is also to be an increase in the minimum wage for all public sector workers from £10 an hour to £10.50.

To help businesses in the retail and hospitality sector

recover from the pandemic, the rates relief scheme will continue into next year but only at 50 per cent rather than the 100 per cent given last year.

Most of the money to pay for it all comes from the UK Government's block grant of £35 billion. That's an 8 per cent increase on pre-pandemic levels but it includes special Covid payments. There is to be no increase in the Scottish income tax rates this year but the thresholds between the bands will be raised for low-income earners and frozen for higher income earners. "It's a progressive tax policy," said Ms Forbes, "meaning that the majority of Scottish tax payers will pay less income tax than if they lived elsewhere in the UK, while those who earn more will pay more."

There are the usual calls from opposition parties and business leaders for more spending but mostly without suggesting where the extra funds should be found. One possibility is for local councils to raise more in council tax, now that they have been freed from the straight-jacket of a government-imposed freeze. But with local elections due in the spring, I wonder how many councils will have the courage to do so.

On the Covid front, the number of new-variant omicron cases is now in the hundreds and it has prompted the government to re-emphasise its message to work from home if possible and continue wearing masks in enclosed public places. Public Health Scotland is urging people not to organise Christmas parties. The number of Covid cases is still high, at around 3,000 every day, with over 500 in hospital and an average of 12 deaths a day.

Finally, we had no sooner cleared up after Storm Arwen than Storm Barra hit us. It's been less severe but 8,000 homes in the North East were again without electricity and there has been a bracing 70mph wind and snow showers across much of the Highlands.

Our dark, cold winters always bring us back to our constant struggle to find sources of energy. Once, we cut down the forests, then we dug out coal, then we drilled for oil and gas and now we are entering a new age of nuclear, wind, sun and water.

We need to get there by 2050 or the planet burns.