

Letter from Scotland

On the day when the Dnipro children arrived in Scotland, we also played our part in the world-wide demonstrations of support for Ukraine in its war with Putin's Russia.

It is true the orphan children rescued by Hibernian football supporters are just 52 of the 2.5 million displaced Ukrainians. And it is true the number of demonstrators was small – in Edinburgh at least. But we are doing something.

There were only a few hours to respond to President Zelenskyy's appeal for mass demonstrations to put pressure on NATO leaders, meeting in Brussels, to do more to rescue Ukraine from destruction. But this is going to be a long campaign, it seems, and the political and humanitarian effort will have to be sustained.

The Dnipro children, for instance, will be spending some weeks in a reception centre near Callander before being housed in family units in Edinburgh. The first minister Nicola Sturgeon told them: "You'll find, love, care and support here for as long as you need it."



Ukraine may be far away but it's suffering is not forgotten. The vigil in Edinburgh on Thursday evening.

When faced with the horrors of this war, it feels petty and selfish to suggest we have problems under our peaceful sky. But much of the news this week has been about the "cost of living" crisis. The UK Chancellor Rishi Sunak has tried to ease the pain with a 5p cut in petrol duty and raising the wage level at which workers and employers will have to start paying National Insurance. It looks generous, until you consider that petrol prices have increased by 40p a litre in the last year and National Insurance itself is being increased by 1.2 per cent from the beginning of April.

The wishfully-named Office for Budget Responsibility has warned us we are heading for tough economic times, inflation at 6.2 per cent rising to over 7 per cent, and the biggest fall in living standards since the 1950s. The Scottish finance secretary Kate Forbes says the Chancellor should be

doing more to help the poorest in society, for instance cutting VAT on energy bills and restoring the recent cuts to welfare benefits. The Scottish Government for its part is to increase its own Child Payments from £10 to £20 a week from April and to £25 by the end of this year.

Covid continues to add to our relative miseries. Two years after the first lockdown, there are a record number of Covid patients in hospital, meaning lengthening waits for other patients. On Thursday there were 2,300 Covid patients but only 26 of them needed intensive care. So although case numbers are still high in the community at over 13,000 (one in 14 people have Covid) this week has seen the end of all legal restrictions, except the need to wear face-masks in shops and on public transport.



UCU strikers on the Royal Mile PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

We have two industrial disputes on our hands. University and college lecturers have been on strike over what their union (UCU) says is a 35 per cent cut in their pensions and a 25 per

cent cut in their pay since 2009. And the 800 staff of P&O Ferries, including those on the route between Scotland and Northern Ireland, have been protesting over their summary dismissal by their masters based in Dubai. This week the company D C World was forced to admit the dismissal notice had been illegal and it's offering to pay £36m to staff in lieu of notice. The 800 are to be replaced by much cheaper foreign labour.

Meanwhile the ferry services to Arran and the Western Isles have been in the news because of delays to the building of two new ferry boats at the Ferguson shipyard on the Clyde. The latest report into this fiasco, from Audit Scotland, reveals that the cost of the ferries has nearly doubled to £240 million and they will be five years late, not entering service till the summer of 2023. The report questions the decision by The Scottish Government to award the contract to Ferguson's, against the advice of the ferry operators Caledonian MacBrayne and the agency Transport Scotland.

Ministers at the time were keen to have the ferries built at home rather than abroad and they wanted to save the Ferguson yard from closure. But the project has been plagued by changes to the ships' design and the yard had to be nationalised in 2019.

Not many of us have noticed that it's Seachdain na Gaidhlig or Gaelic Week. Less than 1 per cent of us speak our native language, much to our shame. (I've tried to learn it three times and failed.) But during the lockdowns, the language-learning app Duolingo has been recruiting a huge number of new learners, 431,000 in fact. A third of them are eager Americans, 25 per cent are British and the rest beam in from all over the world. The app was developed by volunteers here in Scotland and is now being run in conjunction with the Gaelic college on Skye, Sabhal Mor Ostaig.

Some may say that saving Gaelic should be the least of our

worries at a time of war, pestilence and economic hardship. But saving what we can is always worthwhile, like helping 52 orphans out of 2.5 million refugees.