

Letter from Scotland

Spring has come again to remind us that elections, inflation, wars and pestilence come and go but nature keeps plodding on regardless. But plodding more and more slowly it seems. We homo sapiens have made sure of that.

Climate change is catching up with us. So this spring is later and cooler and drier than usual. The water authorities are asking us to be more careful – reservoirs in the south of the country are running low – and the fire service is warning of forest fires. No doubt, in this climate uncertainty, we will have storms and deluges later in the year. But for the moment, the swallows have started to arrive and spring blossom blows gently from the cherry trees.



Blossom falls like confetti from the cherry trees, just yards from my house.



Arthur's Seat in its spring colours.

Although the air is full of bird song, we know that Scotland's bird population is in serious decline (seabirds by over 30 per cent in the last 30 years, upland birds by 18 per cent in the last 20 years). This week a survey published by Buglife found that insects are down by nearly 30 per cent in the last 18 years.

We are heading for Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" and fulfilling the nightmares of environmental prophets, before and since. One of the early warnings came from Henry David Thoreau who in the spring of 1845 borrowed an axe and down to Walden Pond in the woods of Massachusetts and built himself a hut to escape "this nation of ours, which has become an unwieldy, overgrown establishment, cluttered with furniture, tripped up by its own traps and spoilt by luxury and heedless expense."

He yearned for a simpler life and, hopefully, a happier one.

After all, man-like creatures have lived a quiet and presumably happy life for 2 million years without disturbing the gentle balance of Planet Earth. Until evolution threw up our rogue species. And in just the last 200 years – and in the last 20 years in particular – we have managed to despoil the earth, pollute the seas and wreck the climate.

So what has been the big issue in this week's local council elections ? Not the climate or the birds but the "cost of living crisis." And how we can keep on spending and keep gas prices low. The election of 1200 councillors to our 32 district councils is supposed to be about local issues: schools, the care services, waste handling, libraries, sport facilities, traffic congestion, potholes in the roads. But as local authorities get most of their funds and rules from central government, the political parties are rightly judged on their national policies. That puts the SNP in poll position, as it were. It is, after all, the government of the day and still riding high in the opinion polls. That means the issue of Scottish independence is on the election agenda, if not on the ballot paper.

As the results come tumbling out of the counting houses on Friday evening, everyone will be watching who will come second, the Labour Party or the Conservatives. And in the days that follow, everyone will be watching if local coalitions between the rival parties will be formed at individual district level, no matter what the leaders promised beforehand.

It's been a surreal election campaign. We have only seen glimpses of it in the newspapers and on television because there's been so much else to worry us. Inflation is now expected to rise to 10 per cent, the base interest rate has gone up to 1 per cent, the economy is predicted to shrink next year and real incomes fall by at least 1 per cent. Then there's the war in Ukraine, pushing up energy prices, but also horrifying us all with its senseless brutality.

The first Ukrainian refugees have begun arriving in Scotland. A friend who is head of a primary school here in Edinburgh says two young Ukrainian children have just spent their first week in her classrooms and are integrating remarkably well. A Ukrainian flag flies out of a window in my neighbouring street. Friends are singing in a concert this weekend at the cathedral to raise funds for the humanitarian effort in Ukraine. Among the pieces they will sing is the European anthem, Beethoven's "Ode to Joy", now more a hope than an expectation.

And then there is Covid. Case numbers are falling (1600 on Thursday) but hospitals are still struggling to get waiting times down and patients moved on to nursing homes or home-care. A report out from the Royal College of Emergency Medicine this week says there's been a 60 per cent increase in "bed-blocking" in the month of March and only 70 per cent of arrivals in accident and emergency departments are treated within the target of four hours.

But the week was not without some cheerful news. Rangers fans had a brief glimpse of heaven on Thursday night at Ibrox. They watched in typical Scottish disbelief as their team beat RB Leipzig 3:1 to reach the final of the Europa League.

Meanwhile, the two ospreys at the Loch of Lowes in Perthshire have been patiently sitting on their three eggs, with occasional breaks for fishing. Their eternal cycle goes on, no matter what the results, in the football, in the local elections or on the battle fields of Ukraine.