

Letter from Scotland

As wise old King Canute tied to point to his courtiers and people, it is useless to resist a rising tide. But desperate people and pathetic courtiers are nevertheless calling on the government to do something about the rising cost of petrol.

It's now standing at an average of £1.78 a litre and predicted to reach £2 soon. It already has in Wales. It will soon cost over £100 to fill up the tank in a family car.

So there are clamours for further cuts in fuel duty and VAT and a lower price cap in an attempt to keep our transport costs under control. It's all in vain, of course, because the price of petrol, indeed of all fossil fuels, is bound to rise as demand and production costs increase and we move away in horror from Russian gas, Middle Eastern oil and American shale. And, as Nicola Sturgeon reminded us this week in her address to the climate change conference in Bonn, we have to step up our efforts to be carbon-neutral by 2045.

A more sensible response to the rise in the cost of petrol is not to resist it but to use the price rise as a spur to move quickly to electric vehicles and to trains.

But not this month! Because we are facing a series of ominous strikes on our railways. The RMT union is threatening strike action across Britain on 21,23 and 25 June in pursuit of their pay claim and in protest at the cutbacks in services and jobs. Meanwhile the train drivers union Aslef – whose members have been refusing to work overtime in Scotland – has been offered a 5 per cent pay rise, plus bonuses based on passenger numbers.

I say the strikes are “ominous” because they are part of the summer of discontent looming ahead of us. Governments north and south of the border are trying to hold pay rises to around 2 percent but the whole army of public sector workers, teachers, nurses, council staff, are demanding pay rises that keep up with inflation at 9 percent.



One wonders how it's all going to pan out. There's no telling what Boris Johnson will do to survive. Will he order the Chancellor to shake that money tree again and meet the unions' demands, or will he insist on austerity and tax cuts? The vote by Conservative MPs on Monday to endorse his leadership was half-hearted (211 for, 148 against) and exposed big rifts in the party. In Scotland 4 out of the 6 Conservative MPs voted against Johnson, including the Scottish leader Douglas Ross (though he had wavered after the Putin's invasion of Ukraine.)

The SNP may be enjoying the Conservatives' discomfort but this week they experienced a little discomfort of their own. They had to admit that not all their spending plans on roads can be paid for out of their capital budget. The transport minister Jenny Gilruth wasn't giving any details at this stage but it immediately provoked speculation about delays or cancellations to the plans to finish duelling the A9 to Inverness and improvements to A96 in the North East, the A75 to Cairnryan and the A83, "Rest and Be (un) Thankful" in Argyle.

Perhaps under the influence of the Green Party – now part of the government – the justification of all road projects will be more complex. They will have to satisfy several new tests: reducing inequality, improving health and wellbeing, and tackling climate change.

Although we've almost stopped counting, the number of Covid cases in Scotland is still around 1,000 a day with 60 admissions to hospital. Several hale and hearty people I know have fallen victim in the last fortnight.

But, if we can make the comparison, it is nothing compared to the cases of "bird flu" which are raging in many parts of the

county, particularly in the islands. Thousands of dead seabirds have been washed up on beaches from Orkney to the Mull of Galloway. The RSPB this week called on the authorities to come up with a response plan to try to limit the spread of the disease, particularly to important colonies of gannets and great skuas.

I was pleased to see that the BBC's Scottish "Home of the Year" competition was won by a traditional croft house on the Isle of Lewis. Never mind your architectural flights of fancy, your glass and concrete flats, your wooden eco-buildings, here was a humble stone cottage that could only be found in Scotland. It has been beautifully restored by artist Tom Hickman over the past 12 years and thankfully it has no phone, no TV and no internet connection.

And while we're in the islands, there is astonishing news from the island of Hoy in Orkney. Two fearless climbers have managed to scale the sheer cliff face at St John's Head known as "The Long Hope," the highest vertical sea cliff in Britain (345m). Robbie Philips from Edinburgh and Alex Moore from Cornwall have joined the very few people who have successfully completed what's termed "Britain's hardest climb" since it was first conquered in 2011 by another Scottish climber Dave Macleod.

My "Long Hope" is that we can climb out of the corrie we have got ourselves into over petrol prices, wage disputes, climate change and whatever else the fates throw into it.



Pressure at the pumps as petrol heads for £2 a litre.