

Letter from Scotland

It's going to be a long and winding road to the referendum on 19 October 2023. I've likened it in my mind to the famous 15-mile glen that runs through the heart of the Cairngorms and which I was privileged to see on a hill-walk last weekend.

The Lairig Ghru translates from Gaelic as "the daunting pass" and the path through it is rough, boggy at times, strewn with large boulders, winding between steep mountainsides, spectacular and exhilarating.

When you set out on an adventure like this, you never know what might happen. So, bravely, on Tuesday, Nicola Sturgeon set out her route map to parliament. Faced with the refusal of the Johnson government to countenance another Scottish referendum, Ms Sturgeon is going to ask the UK Supreme Court to rule on whether the devolved Scottish parliament can hold an independence referendum. If the judges say No, she will turn the next UK general election in Scotland into a referendum on independence. If most voters vote for independence parties (the SNP and the Greens), she will begin negotiations with Westminster on Scotland becoming a separate state.



The road to the referendum. The Lairig Ghru from Carn a' Mhaim.

Of course, it's all a manoeuvre to persuade the UK government to agree to abide by the result of a referendum, as they did last time in 2014. And it's also a strategy to build support for independence over the next 18 months. The opinion polls show that the country is still evenly divided, with maybe 10 per cent of the population open to persuasion.

The trouble is that both campaigns are not on the same battleground. The unionist parties (Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrats) say a referendum is a distraction from the day to day problems of rising prices, a stumbling economy, poor public services. The SNP don't deny the problems but say independence is the solution to them.

It's also clear that the reason why unionists don't want a referendum is that they fear they might lose. The SNP, on the other hand, are prepared to take the risk.



Royal Company of Archers, High Street, Edinburgh, 30th June 2022

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All this constitutional flag waving is going on while the Queen is on her traditional "Scottish week." Soldiers have been on the march around Holyrood Palace and elsewhere in the city centre. Nicola Sturgeon has been seen gently shaking the royal hand and chatting to her majesty – we don't know what about, but I guess they avoided the referendum. And I guess too that the Queen was too polite to mention the troubles facing her first minister in Scotland – the police working to rule over pay, treatment times in hospitals lengthening and a couple of her MPs and former MPs making unhelpful headlines, one going to jail for embezzlement Natalie McGarry, another, Patrick Grady, "stepping away" from the party while the police investigate allegations of sexual harassment were made against him.

There was further evidence this week that people are becoming more prepared to report sexual crimes. The latest crime figures show that the number of sexual crimes rose to over 15,000 in 2021/22, a 15 per cent increase on the year before. There was also a rise in violent crime, despite the overall crime figures falling.

The latest news on the Scottish economy is not good. The Fraser of Allander Institute published a report saying the recovery from the Covid pandemic is faltering. More than half of the people in the Institute's survey reported spending less on non-essential items. A third said they were cutting back on essential items like food and fuel. Inflation (at 9 per cent) is going to last longer than expected and the Institute's growth forecast has been cut from 1.5 per cent next year to 0.5 per cent.

We may be getting poorer, but with the school holidays starting this week, the airports are reporting a rush for holiday resorts abroad. It's the pent-up demand for hot beaches after two years of Covid restrictions. We're clearly not taking climate change seriously.

Nor are we taking the war in Ukraine as seriously as we should. Britain has accepted only 65,000 refugees from Ukraine, the lowest figure per head in Europe except for France. Germany has welcomed over 700,000.



Council Leader Cllr Cammy Day visits the Ukrainian Club with the Consul General Yevhen Mankovskyi and meets Olexander Diudiunyk and his fiancée Darea Shyeyaievk PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

My own city of Edinburgh has taken in 5,000 but the numbers are lower across Scotland and there have been delays in councils finding suitable accommodation. This week however, the Scottish government took the unusual step of contributing £65 million to the UK's £1 billion fund for military equipment for Ukraine. Until now, the Scottish government has confined its aid to humanitarian and medical support (£7 million) and it says the contribution to UK defence spending should not become a precedent.

If the map of Europe is being redrawn, or at least re-alignments are taking place in the membership of the European

Union and NATO, then perhaps it's time for Scotland to consider its place in this new world.

Something to think about on the road to the referendum.