

Letter from Scotland

One of the joys of living in a city is that when you get out into the countryside it has such a refreshing impact. So for us city-dwellers, summer holidays in the hills or on the coast are an enchanting dream – to look forward to and back upon. It's like coming up for spiritual air.

We are lucky to have plenty of countryside in Scotland (98 per cent) so we record 4 million trips to the hills and coasts each year. Leading the charge is the Queen herself who decamps to Balmoral for her summer holidays. The 20,000 hectare estate in Aberdeenshire was bought by Prince Albert for Queen Victoria in 1852 and has the usual Highland mix of grouse moors, forests and farms and mountains.

My favourite is Lochnagar, a spectacular mountain on the south side of the Balmoral estate. Its scary cliffs crouch around a tiny loch (Lochan na Gaire). I've climbed it five times, in sunshine, rain and snow, and never got tired of it...though always exhausted by it. It is, of course, a "Munro" (1,155m/3,789ft), one of the 282 in Scotland. Thousands of walkers take to these hills each year. Over 6,000 determined people have climbed all of them. Munro-bagging has become an industry in itself, part of the greater Scottish tourism industry, now worth £12 billion a year or five per cent of our total economy and seven per cent of the jobs.

Everyone is hoping that this holiday season will repair the damage done to the tourism industry by the Covid pandemic. But alas, a staff shortage has dashed that hope. A survey published by the Scottish Tourism Alliance found that nearly half of providers had cut back their business because of staff shortage. It's largely caused by the exodus of migrant workers from Eastern Europe due to Boris Johnson's Brexit wheeze.

Stay calm. One of the joys of hill-walking is that you can literally rise above the follies of our everyday lives. You look down on them as tiny figures trudging through the glen below and think: "these hills have been here for 400 million years and they will be here when our civilisation has burnt itself out." The important thing is to be happy while we are here.

Having thus breathed in a little happy air, we can return to the world below and face its trials and tribulations with renewed energy. Please, can someone get rid of Putin and end this war in Ukraine. Please, can Conservative Party members chose our next prime minister with a little more care than last time. Please can whoever is in power do something to compensate the poorest 20 of the population for the 10 per cent rise in the cost of living.



Take to the hills ! Lochnagar, Aberdeenshire.

And please, can we all take climate change seriously. I'm writing this after a heatwave that has swept across Europe causing deaths from heat exhaustion, forest fires, melting roads, buckling train tracks, and water shortages. Temperatures in Scotland reached an all-time record, 34.8°C at Charterhall in the Borders.

We know what governments must do: let the cost of petrol rise to make us more careful in the use of it, cut back on gas, move to wind and solar power, electrify our transport, and ban the manufacture of plastic bottles and packaging. And for our part, we citizens ought to accept a few inconveniences and vote for politicians who have the courage to lead.

None of this is happening in Britain, which raises the disturbing question of whether this dysfunctional state should continue to be. Nicola Sturgeon is spending the summer trying to convince a majority of us that Scotland would do better on

its own. The campaign will last right through the next 15 months, with a date set for a referendum on 19 October 2023. Her argument is that independence is not about the constitution. It's about schools and hospitals, care services, the environment, jobs and wages, tax and fairness. It's about what sort of country we want to live in.

Of course Unionists will say the same thing. But the problem is that the current British state appears to be moving in a different direction to Scotland. All the contenders for prime minister – including the final two, Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak – want a smaller role for government and lower taxes.

Can Britain change? A lot depends on leadership from the Labour Party, which at the moment appears to be following the flock from behind. And quite a bit depends on the public sector trade unions. Can they force the government to increase spending and level-up wages by a summer of discontent? Or will they settle for 5 per cent increases against a background of 10 per cent inflation? Acceptance or revolution?

Britain is out of practice in the art of revolution but in the heat of summer a spark can start a conflagration.

Often it takes a poet to set the heather on fire, like George Gordon Byron, the Aberdeenshire radical who championed the Romantic Movement. He was only too happy to get away from the "tame and domestic" life of the lowlands to climb his local hill, "the steep frowning glories of dark Lochnagar." I share his love of the mountain but it's not a place which frowns on the life below, it's a place that frees us from it.