

# Letter from Scotland

The first week of the Edinburgh Festival has been a scorcher. Temperatures in the high 20s, blazing sunshine, a warm gentle breeze, crowds from all over the world, dressed for the Mediterranean. We're not used to such steady weather.

Everyone is enjoying being at a full-blown festival again, after the last two years of no shows, or on-line shows, or cautious hybrid attempts at entertainment. We are looking forward to over a million visitors and 3,000 shows over the three-week extravaganza of festivals – the official festival, the mighty fringe, the book festival, the TV festival, the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo.



## Staying cool at the Festival

Ticket sales have got off to a slow start but they are said to be more encouraging as the days go by, and the weather stays friendly and people forget about the “cost of living crisis” for just a moment. The arts are, after all, supposed to lift our spirits above the cares of the real world.

The Conservative leadership “Punch and Judy” show certainly belongs in the realm of bizarre entertainment rather than the real world. It’s the appropriate and appalling legacy of the clown clearing out of the dressing room in Downing Street. No wonder the Westminster system is viewed with such dismay in Scotland.

How can it be that the fate of Britain is being decided by 200,000 people who only seem to care about tax-cuts? How can so much depend on two people making up their manifestos as they go along, without the benefit of cabinet colleagues or civil service expertise?

Both Rishi Sunak and Liz Truss seem to have joined in the collective delusion that energy prices can be held down. They can't and they shouldn't. We need to be using less gas and oil if we are serious about tackling climate change. The cost of living "crisis" is only a crisis for the poor, for which they should be compensated. Handing out £400 to everybody (plus £650 to some) and tax cuts to the rich is not a sensible response. It doesn't tackle the crisis.

Nor will it lead to a growing economy. There is no reason why tax giveaways should result in any more growth than government spending. And here's another common fallacy: that we can only tackle poverty by going for economic growth. A cake needn't be bigger to be shared, it can be divided more evenly.

This idea has occurred to a number of trade unions which are now threatening strike action for better pay. 1,500 council workers across Scotland are due to strike later this month – including 300 street cleaning staff in Edinburgh. Royal Mail across Britain will cease deliveries on 26 and 31 August. More rail strikes are likely in the autumn. Teachers and nurses are also in dispute over their wage settlements. And in the private sector, 250 maintenance staff walked out on Wednesday at the oil refinery at Grangemouth.

You can see their point: inflation is at 10 per cent but current pay offers are between 2 and 5 per cent. There's also a shortage of staff in most of these industries. Vacancies are not being filled, which ought to make us value labour more. The government – if there was one – should be seeking to balance reasonable wage rises against the danger of causing spiralling inflation.

Another levelling-up project which has hit a difficulty is the "attainment gap" in Scotland's schools. The exam results came out this week, showing the gap in Higher certificates between schools in affluent areas and those in deprived areas stands at 15 per cent, well up on 7.8 per cent last year. Nicola

Sturgeon must surely regret making eliminating of the attainment gap her most important target. It's just so difficult.



### Eilean Donan Castle

I've just returned from a family holiday near the famous Eilean Donan castle on the west coast. Unlike the east coast, the west is still comparatively green, with trees and grass still enjoying some rain and cooler temperatures. Little did I suspect this rural idyll would make headline news as soon as I arrived home. A man was arrested in Dornie after a series of shootings in Skye and Lochalsh which left one man dead and three people injured. It has, of course, shocked the island community, who've been left wondering what it was all about. It's not what they are used to.

We're not used to gun violence, or to hot weather, or to winning much in the sporting field. But Scotland has walked away from the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham with 51 medals,

including two sensational golds from Laura Muir in the 1500m and Eilish McColgan in the 10,000m, repeating her mother's achievement a generation ago.

It was all happening while I was running round the track at the Highland Games in Portree, and coming in last!