

Letter from Scotland

It's such a mad world at present that it's a real pleasure to step into the courtyard at the College of Art in Edinburgh and breathe the cool, quiet air of books and thoughtful writers.

At the opening of the Book Festival last weekend, the director Nick Barley said it should be seen as "a form of defiance" against forces that want to quash debate or just drown it out.

He was speaking after the assassination attempt on Sir Salman Rushdie, who has often appeared at the Festival in the past. But his words could equally apply to the whole intolerant spirit of our times. The shrill voices of nationalism and unionism, tax-cutters and state spenders, Brexiteers and Europeans, champions of workers' rights, women's rights, ethnic rights, minority rights, unborn baby rights, have led us into this age of anger. Reason is trampled upon and quiet discussion is unfashionable.

So over 500 novelists, poets, science writers, economists, political commentators, children's storytellers have come into this quiet courtyard in "defiance" to bring a little sensitivity to proceedings. May they dilute the madness that's all about us here in Edinburgh – the gritty theatre productions, the edgy films at the Film Festival, and my particular rotten fish, the stand-up "comedy" acts that make up so much of the Fringe.



A quiet corner of Festival City

The stand-up acts in the Conservative Party leadership contest are at once a comedy and a tragedy. Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak came to Perth this week to appeal to Conservative Party members for their support. It was comic in the way they pandered to whatever the audience wanted to hear – no to a second independence referendum, yes to tax cuts, and yes to more “scrutiny” of the SNP. But it was tragic in the face of the real problems the country faces.

Take the current wave of strikes. We have a rail strike and a waste collectors’ strike going on as I write. Council workers, teachers and nurses are all threatening industrial action over pay. We learned this week from the Office of National Statistics that household incomes are increasing at four per cent, but price inflation is going up by 10 per cent. Where is the Westminster government going to find the money to reach a fair pay settlement ? By borrowing – as it

did during the pandemic – or increasing taxes? Or will Truss or Sunak sit out a winter of discontent and see if workers are prepared to take a cut in their standard of living?

Will The Scottish Government use its cost of living review to take money out of capital projects – like road repairs – to put into local government so that councils can afford to offer a bigger pay rise?

As for the Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer has suggested freezing any rise in the price cap for gas and electricity – to be paid for by a higher windfall tax on oil and gas companies. And in Scotland Anas Sarwar has suggested using The Scottish Government's "hidden waste money" to ease household energy bills.

It's all populist nonsense, of course, because the price of oil and gas needs to rise so that we use less of it...and save the planet. But none of our "leaders" has the courage to lead us. Hard times need hard measures and we're just going to have to accept a lower standard of living.

According to one survey out this week, a quarter of Scots will not be taking a holiday this year and of those that do, half will be holidaying here in Scotland. The reasons cited are unsurprising: the cost of living and the uncertainty of travelling abroad.

Those who went to Spain or France in search of sunshine might just as well have stayed at home because we have just had a record breaking heat wave. But then the usual Scottish uncertainty swept in, and it all ended at the weekend with a two-day downpour and thunder and lightning. No sooner were farmers in Fife banned from withdrawing water from the River Eden, than the ban was lifted, the very next day.

The pandemic surfaced again this week when the former SNP MP Margaret Ferrier pleaded guilty in court to a breach of the Covid rules. She admitted mixing with others in a church, a

pub, on the train and then in Westminster while awaiting the result a Covid test, which turned out to be positive. She then took the train back to her constituency in Rutherglen. This was in September 2020 when everyone else – apart from Boris Johnson of course – was trying hard to abide by the rules. She's already been thrown out of the SNP and will be sentenced by the Sheriff next month. It may all end up in an embarrassing by-election.

Finally, while Edinburgh has been boasting about its festivals, Glasgow has been blowing about its World Pipe Band Championships. 146 bands from around the piping world came to Glasgow Green last weekend for two days of noisy competition. The Field Marshal Montgomery Pipe Band from Northern Ireland came first, for the thirteenth time, just beating Scotland's best hope, the Inveraray and District Pipe Band.

Of all the things Scotland has given the world – great writers, whisky, golf, curling, the Edinburgh Festival – the most stirring of them all is the skirl of the pipes.

