

Letter from Scotland

It's been the driest summer in Scotland for 150 years and the driest summer in Europe for 500 years.

But the same climate change has brought floods to millions of people in Pakistan, Indonesia, West and Central Africa. Indeed last winter it brought us storms Arwen, Barra and Corrie here in Scotland.

Yet the issue hardly gets a mention in the battles of the autumn over the cost of living, strikes and pay disputes, or the state of the health service. And it's certainly not on Liz Truss's agenda, even though she's likely to become Prime Minister on Tuesday.

It's strange how quickly we forget the last crisis when we are dealing a new one. It's almost as if we've lost our instinct for survival. The Covid pandemic has been forgotten, even though it was the great fear and dread just few months ago. Gone are our promises not to holiday abroad, to reform the economy, to protect the most vulnerable, to create a new post-pandemic world of international co-operation.



Bins remained uncollected in Rutland Square on Friday PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

And so we turn away to more immediate concerns – the cost of living and those strikes. As I write the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon is shuttling between the trade unions and their council employers urging them to settle the dispute which has resulted in our waste bins not being emptied and, possibly, our schools being closed next week. The unions are holding out for a flat rate cash settlement for all workers of around £2,000 and for that to be consolidated into their normal pay grade. It would mean an overall 5 per cent pay increase, made possible by extra money from elsewhere in The Scottish Government's budget.

But everyone is also waiting to see what Liz Truss will do about the cost of living and the pay disputes. Once, this is, she kisses the Queen's hand at Balmoral on Tuesday and, in her words "hits the ground running". Her critics joke that she

may just hit the ground.

The 180,000 Conservative party members, who appear to have voted overwhelmingly for her, think they've found another Margaret Thatcher. But they may find this lady "is for turning", as she has done over Brexit and just about every policy she has announced during the leadership campaign. We can but hope her Guru is more like John Maynard Keynes than Sir Keith Joseph.

Her autumn agenda is to do something about the 80 per cent rise in energy bills, general inflation at 10 per cent, rising mortgage rates and the poorest in society facing a Victorian autumn and winter. But if you think the short-term prospects are bleak, the long term prospects for the Scottish economy look even bleaker, according to the Scottish Fiscal Commission. It predicts that our national income will grow by less than 1 per cent per year over the next 50 years and the population will decline by 16 per cent. 44 per cent of the population will be over the age of 65.



The hot days of summer give way to the cold wars of autumn. Politically that translates as “we’d better stick to the UK” or “we’re being held back by Brexit Britain.” And the difficulty is that the population – the present population – are divided right down the middle on the issue.

Here in Edinburgh, we are hanging our heads in shame as we look back at the Festival. The rubbish, piled high in the streets, is only now being cleared, after a week-long strike by waste collectors. And the various festivals themselves have not quite recovered from the two year interruption due to the pandemic. Tickets sales were down about a quarter and there was a severe shortage of accommodation for performers and audiences. We’re wondering if the Edinburgh Festivals have reached their limit and how they can remain the top cultural event in the world while ceasing to grow.

The struggle for survival is even harder at sea. It’s been a summer of disaster for our famous colonies of sea birds. A

particularly vicious case of bird flu has caused the death of thousands of geese, gannets, herring gulls, puffins, guillemots and kittiwakes. In all, 28 species have been affected in nearly 140 locations around the Scottish coast. Earlier in the year poultry farmers were required to keep their flocks indoors and some 23 islands were closed to the public. The government agency Nature Scot has set up a task force to tackle the outbreak, the worst on record. It says it's a sign of the dangers of climate change and the loss of biodiversity.

I can't help drawing a comparison with our human Covid pandemic. Without the vaccine, and its roll-out, we might have suffered on the same scale as the sea birds. Another lucky escape for mankind.



Edinburgh International Book Festival – Day 1, Edinburgh
School of Art, 13th Aug 2022

© 2022 J.L. Preece