

Letter from Scotland

It's been the earliest harvest in Scotland for 25 years. Not surprising, considering it's been the driest summer for 150 years and temperatures have reached record highs. Our farmers have moved on and begun thinking what to plant for next year. Like the rest of us, they face an unstable climate and an unstable economy.

Apparently the wheat crop was good this year and the price held up because of the troubles in "the breadbasket of Europe." Barley, planted in the dry spring, has done less well but the price has held up because of the growing demand from the whisky industry. But in general, farmers are facing meltdown. Not just a changing climate but a "cost of farming crisis" that dwarfs our cost of living crisis.

The cost of fertiliser has gone up four times, animal feed up 60 per cent and fuel up 30 per cent. The average farm income in 2021 was below £40,000 and the £500 million subsidy given to Scottish agriculture has not changed in 20 years.



Changing climate means the harvest has been gathered in long before autumn arrives.

The National Farmers Union is currently calling on The Scottish Government to spell out its intentions on the future of farming. All the government seems to be saying is that farming needs to produce food more sustainably. Does that mean cutting the use of fertiliser and meat production, or does it mean planting more trees and leaving land to “re-wild”? There are big choices to be made.

The Prime Minister and her Chancellor made a big choice last week which has not gone down well. “Tax cuts from day one” was Liz Truss’ slogan to win the hearts of 80,000 Tory members. But no one else is impressed. Not the financial markets, not the Bank of England, nor the International Monetary Fund, nor Nicola Sturgeon who described the reduction in the top rate of income tax as “morally repugnant”. She said she would not be following suit in Scotland.

Cutting tax for the rich in the hope it might boost economic growth is an experiment which a fifth of Scots households cannot afford, according to a survey published this week by the investment firm Aberdeen Standard Life, which now likes to be known by the abbreviated name "**abrdn**". 21 per cent of households surveyed said they were facing serious financial hardship, cutting back on energy and food and struggling to pay regular bills.

Where the UK Government has got into trouble is that it has chosen to cap energy bills by borrowing some £100 billion instead of raising it in tax. It's a temptation not available to The Scottish Government, which has limited borrowing powers, but it means there is little Ms Sturgeon can do to protect the poor from the rising cost of living. Of course, it doesn't stop the opposition parties blaming the SNP for government austerity.

Where Labour and the Conservatives are on stronger ground is the debacle over the ferry-building programme. It emerged this week that the two ferry boats, being built by Ferguson's shipyard on the Clyde and desperately needed for the west coast islands, will be even later and more expensive than promised. At £300 million they are three times over budget and five years late. There's also an investigation into the fairness of the awarding of the original contract. Embarrassing at least, scandalous at worst.

A murder case that has intrigued and horrified the Highlands for over 40 years has finally been resolved. William MacDowell, now aged 80, was found guilty of murdering his former lover Renée MacRae and their three year old son Andrew. Over the years there have been many theories and searches after Mrs MacRae's car was found burnt out in a layby on the A9. Their bodies have still not been found and it's not clear what led to the police breakthrough in the case. The judge at the High Court in Inverness said MacDowell had planned the murders in a premeditated and calculating way and

he sentenced him to 30 years in prison.



Mark Beaumont with Transport Convener Cllr Scott Arthur promoting Car Free Day which will be held on Waverley Bridge on 2 October PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

A more cheerful story to come from the Highlands this week is a new cycling record for the North Coast 500, the popular tourist route that winds its weary way round the tiny roads of Sutherland and Caithness and back to Inverness. The well-known Scottish cyclist Mark Beaumont (39) has returned to the route to set a new record of 28 hours, 35 minutes.

He rode continuously, except for 16 minutes of break-time, against strong winds for much of the time. That's an average of 18mph and it beats the previous record by Robbie Mitchell by half an hour and it is nine hours quicker than Beaumont's own previous record set in 2015.

As a cyclist myself, I've admired Mark Beaumont's cycling adventures, round-the-world, north to south America, north to south Africa, setting records all the time. I've always

wondered what he thinks about as he stares down at the tarmac rolling beneath him. Does he think about the future of farming, or ferry contracts, or the state of the financial markets or the cost of living crisis?

I hope he leaves such troubles to people who read and write this column.