

Letter from Scotland

So much is falling apart this week it's hard to know where to start: Liz Truss' government, the Conservative party's prospects in Scotland, the railway system, the NHS, or the Scottish Covid inquiry.

Let's start with Liz Truss and her mission impossible – to grow the economy by cutting spending. It's hard to believe that after her defeat over a tax cut for the highest earners she appears to be pressing ahead with plans to cut welfare benefits and impose more austerity on the public services. Where is the spending power to come from to produce 2.5% real growth? Even Conservative MPs are beginning to doubt the plan, and the slump in the money markets has revealed the fears of well-paid and uncapped city traders.

In Scotland there's bewilderment at what's going on in London. Scottish Conservatives have been left with their heads spinning, trying to support whatever u-turn Westminster executes. Their leader, Douglas Ross, was one day calling on Nicola Sturgeon to follow Liz Truss' example and reduce taxes on the rich. The next day he was saying that would be unfair. The latest opinion poll, for The Scotman newspaper, puts Conservative support at just 15 per cent, the worst rating since 2015 when they had only one MP in Scotland.



Beginning to crumble.... East Cairn Hill, Pentlands.

But the Conservatives are not the only ones finding it hard to hold things together. The SNP/Green government is facing strikes, or strike ballots, on the railways, in the hospitals and schools. The rail system will come to a virtual standstill this weekend, on Saturday because of a strike by Network Rail staff, and on Monday by ScotRail staff. The unions are demanding wage rises to keep up with inflation at 10 per cent.

In the NHS, 50,000 nurses are being balloted on strike action for the first time in the 106-year history of the Royal College of Nursing. They are seeking a 15 per cent pay rise to make up for years of being undervalued. Hospital waiting times have hit another high and the ambulance service is still making headlines over long waits. The government this week announced another £600 million to recruit a thousand more nurses, many from abroad because there are not enough are being trained at Scottish universities.

The demand for real wage rises is, of course, driven by the rise in the cost of living and increasing levels of poverty. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation has published a study showing that in the 20 per cent of low-income households in Scotland a quarter of them have been forced to cut back on at least three essentials like food, energy and transport. It talks of "a bleak picture of a society in crisis". I wonder why it's never occurred to those who say the answer is to grow the economic cake that the existing cake could be sliced up more fairly.

In an effort to ease the plight of housing tenants, The Scottish Parliament has rushed through a bill which will freeze rents for the next six months and make evictions more difficult. The Conservatives opposed it and the Scottish Association of Housing Associations said the measure would be counter-productive. But some tenants were being faced with 30 per cent rent increases.

Covid raised its ugly head again this week. The number of people in hospital went up 12 per cent to 744. But the winter vaccination programme is getting under way, with more than 400,000 elderly people being vaccinated.

And attention has shifted to the official inquiry into how the pandemic was handled by the politicians and the health authorities. In England the inquiry began holding hearings this week. But in Scotland we learned that the judge in our own inquiry, Lady Poole and four senior lawyers, have resigned after 10 months in the job and no hearings have yet been held. The whole affair remains a mystery, though The Scottish Government has denied there's been any political interference.

Scotland has sprouted a new city. The ancient capital of Dunfermline has been over-looked for centuries but on Monday King Charles arrived there in his kilt to declare "it would gladden my dear mother's heart" to know that Dunfermline will now take its rightful place as Scotland's eighth city.

Out on the international football pitches, the men's teams have not been doing too well. Rangers fell to Liverpool at Anfield 2-0, Celtic went to Leipzig and lost 3-1. But our national women's team won a hard game against Austria at Hampden, 1-0 in extra time. If they can beat Ireland next week, they are on their way to the World Cup.

Another thing Scotland's women are good at is knitting, according to The University of Glasgow. It has just brought out a book of knitting patterns based on the gothic designs of its ancient buildings. The university's history department has made a special study of the knitting industry in Scotland from the 18th century onwards, through the heyday of the textile industry to the Fair Isle jerseys of today. The university even has its own wool, the Cochno, which comes from its herd of Scotch Mule sheep at its farm near Clydebank.

If things fall apart, perhaps we can knit them together again.



The blue scarf



And the original inspiration © University of Glasgow