

Letter from Scotland

It would be fun watching the UK government fall apart, if it were not so serious. But after Liz Truss' adventures in wonderland, we are back on the straight and narrow, back to "Tory austerity" to try to balance the books. Taking a different way forward, Nicola Sturgeon has published the SNP's plan to rebuild the Scottish economy through independence.

It's surprising that there's no surge in support for independence, given the chaos at Westminster, but the opinion polls show no sign of it. They are still showing Scotland divided right down the middle.

Perhaps we all in a state of shock. How can it be that a mad plan to leap to a "low tax, high growth" economy was ever allowed to see the light of day? It was never going to work. Modern service-based economies operate by being an equal partnership between government and independent organisations.



The way forward...back to the straight and narrow.

The 80,000 Conservative party members who voted Ms Truss into office live in a 19th century wonderland, when Britain was the workshop of the world. Making things and exporting them was our business. Now, manufacturing only accounts for 10 per cent of the economy and exports only a quarter. And even that quarter consists largely of services, like finance, scientific expertise, education and tourism.

And as for “growth”. That too has changed. It must now be green growth to be sustainable, not just a dash to high earnings for the few. As a sign that the Tories have not really changed their spots, the new chancellor is keeping the plan to scrap the cap on bankers’ bonuses and he says his long term aim remains a low-tax economy.



Jeremy Hunt speaking from the back benches to the House of Commons in response to a statement by Health Secretary, Thérèse Coffey. on 22 September PHOTO UK Parliament/Andy Bailey

Outlining the SNP's way forward, Nicola Sturgeon said she is aiming for a "stronger, fairer and more sustainable" economy.

The 108 page paper, "Building a New Scotland" says an independent Scotland would be able to borrow more, and tax the oil and gas companies more, to raise funds for a £20 billion national investment scheme to grow the economy. Scotland would apply to re-join the European Union and use the pound sterling as its currency until introducing a currency of its own.

The plan however raised as many questions as it answered. The unionist parties are demanding to know: how long would Scotland continue to be tied to the British pound and therefore the Westminster treasury? How would cross-border trade be handled? How much oil revenue is there left to tax? How long would it take to get back into the EU and would other countries veto Scotland's application?

Meanwhile, the existing devolved government is facing as bleak a winter as the rest of us with the cost of living rising at 10 per cent while its budget is likely to be cut under the new chancellor's austerity measures. Already the NHS is creaking (waiting times at emergency departments hit another record high this week) and there are pay strikes looming in hospitals, on the railways and in the schools.

The pandemic we are concerned about this week is not Covid but bird flu. Poultry farmers are being required to keep their free-range flocks in fenced areas and to observe strict hygiene and access rules.

It's the biggest outbreak of avian flu in Britain on record. Cases have been reported at over 30 chicken farms in the UK in the past month, two of them in Scotland – in Orkney and the Western Isles. And the outbreak has devastated our sea bird populations. The Scottish Government has set up its own task force to deal with the disease, but for wild birds at least, there is no vaccination programme. We can only watch in horror as bird carcasses are washed up on the shore.

The annual Gaelic festival, the MOD, has been fiddling and blowing and singing all week in Perth. Some 2,000 musicians are taking part and over 7,000 visitors have added an estimated £1m to the local economy. But that's nothing compared to £4 million brought in by the Celtic Festival in Stornoway in the summer. Or the £300m generated by the Edinburgh Festivals.



Nicola Benedetti, Haymarket Yards, Edinburgh, 13th Aug 2021

© 2021 J.L. Preece

This week the new director of the Official Edinburgh International Festival, the violinist Nicola Benedetti, has been outlining her way forward: “to celebrate the profound stories that lie within our nation’s identity.” So there will be a heavy influence of home-grown music and art but it will have to be of the highest quality. And, while popular acts will be booked, there’s to be no eroding of the classical core.

Believe it or not, Ms Benedetti is the first woman and the first Scot to be appointed director in the festival’s 75 year history. And she’s the first celebrity performer, which prompted questions about how much she knows of festival organising. But she says she’s been playing at international festivals all over the world for 20 years and has learnt a thing or two.

By next summer we will all need a lot of cheering up and a lot of inspiration.