

Letter from Scotland

The week began with both Nicola Sturgeon and Rishi Sunak at the UN climate talks in Egypt as the world's glaciers melt. It ended with them meeting at the British Irish Council as the United Kingdom is in danger of falling apart.

And on Sunday they will stand at their respective war memorials with the rumbling sound of war in Europe in the background. There is a lot to talk about.

Nicola Sturgeon was first off the mark at Sharm El-Sheikh, calling on rich nations to contribute to a "loss and damage" fund for poor countries suffering from climate change. Scotland made a first contribution of £2 million last year at the conference in Glasgow and Ms Sturgeon announced another £5 million this year. Rishi Sunak arrived a day later – having changed his mind on going at all – to pledge £90 million towards preserving the rainforest in the Congo basin and £65.5 million for clean energy schemes in developing countries.

Climate campaigners have derided these figures as small and hypocritical, compared with the billion pound cuts being made

at home on clean energy production and home insulation. And of course they go nowhere near the sums needed to reach net zero emissions by 2050 and keep global temperatures below a catastrophic 2 per cent rise. As the UN Secretary General has put it: “We must answer the planet’s distress signals with action.....or we will be in climate hell.”

For the first time in 15 years a British prime minister is attending the British Irish Council, set up under the “Good Friday Agreement” which ended the troubles in Northern Ireland. It looks as if the Westminster government is finally waking up to the “Irish question” and the “Scottish question”. The question being: why are we here? Why is the Brexit “protocol” issue still not resolved and Northern Ireland without a government? And why should Scotland not become an independent country?



Our melting planet. The “glaciers” of Ben Macdui.
For Rishi Sunak it’s his first meeting with Nicola Sturgeon

since he became Prime Minister. She's made no secret of her message to him: you must allow a second independence referendum next year and do not impose another round of austerity in next week's financial statement.

In particular, there is the pressing issue of a series of strikes over pay threatened by nurses, teachers and railway workers in the next few weeks. The Scottish Government cannot make any higher offer than the 5 -7 per cent on the table without an increase in its grant from Westminster. For the nurses, it's the first time in the 104-year history of the Royal College of Nursing that its members have voted for strike action. They want a 17 per cent rise, to compensate for previous low pay settlements and to keep up with the current 10 per cent rise in the cost of living.

The Scottish health minister Humza Yousaf is now scrambling around the local health boards making arrangements for emergency cover – which the nurses themselves have pledged to provide. But he has warned that the effect of a strike will be “catastrophic” on all non-emergency services. As if things are not bad enough, with waiting times already at record lengths in accident and emergency units, ambulance services and queues for routine surgery.

Even the Marine Conservation Society was surprised when the results of the Great British Beach Clean in September were published this week. The amount of beach litter collected by 1200 volunteers in Scotland increased by 42 per cent compared with last year, for no special reason. It's just that we are continuing to throw plastic bottles, crisp packets, cotton buds and wet wipes into the sea. The MCS is calling on The Scottish Government to ban plastic in wet wipes and get on with its much-postponed plastic-bottle-return scheme.

Getting back to climate change, it's been a week of unusually mild weather, up to 18C, but with a strong wind blowing away the last of the autumn leaves. It's in line with the World

Meteorological Organisation's warning this week that the past eight years have been the hottest on record and that we can expect alarming sea rises, due to melting ice everywhere, from the Alps and the Himalayas, to the polar ice caps.

And there's a poignant example here in Scotland as we come to Remembrance Sunday. The cemetery on the isle of Lewis containing the graves of victims of the Iolaire disaster during the First World War is in danger of being washed into the sea. 200 men, returning from the war in 1919, drowned when the Iolaire struck rocks as it came into the harbour at Stornoway. An appeal has been launched to raise £200,000 to protect the cemetery from serious coastal erosion.

Even our past is in danger of being washed away, never mind our future.