

Letter from Scotland

It's one the annoying paradoxes of climate change that, as we talk of the dangers of global warming, we enter a cold snap which has seen temperatures in Scotland fall to minus 6° or 7°C this week. There's been 5cm of snow across much of the North East and severe travel disruption.

But we know that, inexorably, the planet is getting warmer. Migrants are fleeing the deserts and the floodplains, and here in Europe, we are watching sea levels and rivers rise around us. Like King Canute, we are only standing on a temporary sand bank.

Yet we are doing so little about it. The independent Committee on Climate Change published a report this week saying the Scottish Government was "on a trend to failure" to meet its "world beating" target of net zero carbon emissions by 2045. It is off track on seven of its eleven specific targets, for example, car-use reduction, home energy efficiency and peatland restoration. While good progress is being made on renewable energy, it still only accounts for 27 per cent of our total energy requirements for electricity, heating and transport.



The first dusting of snow in Edinburgh

The UK Government, on the other hand, is on a totally different course. It is licensing 900 new oil and gas exploration fields in the North Sea. This week it approved a new coal mine in Cumbria, the first in Britain for 30 years. It has scrapped the "green levy" on energy companies and is dishing out huge sums to cut our energy bills this winter, whether we need the money or not. If we were really serious about cutting carbon emissions we would be letting the price of gas rise so that people use less of it.

While the rich three-quarters of the population can cope with the rise in the cost of living, the poorer quarter are in real hardship and those on middle incomes feel the injustice of prices rising at 10 per cent but their wages are not keeping up. Hence the rolling strikes in our schools. Half the country was affected on Wednesday and the other half on Thursday. Railway workers have stepped up their strike

action, threatening travel chaos before, during and after Christmas and the New Year. Nurses are still balloting on strike action.

The Scottish interim Finance Secretary John Swinney says his hands are tied by the limits of the block grant he gets from Westminster. But the Scottish Trades Union Council and a number of anti-poverty charities are urging Mr Swinney to use his budget next week to bring in a series of wealth taxes to raise funds for cost of living wage settlements. The Institute for Public Policy Research says £200 million could be raised each year by putting a penny on the top rate of income tax and a further £350 million could be raised by increasing council tax on higher value properties.



Stephen Flynn MP new Leader of the SNP at Westminster PHOTO ©UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor

The SNP blame “Westminster austerity” for the troubles in the public services and that certainly has boosted the independence cause. An opinion poll for Scottish Television has put support for independence at 56 per cent. It was

carried out just after the Supreme Court ruling last month that the Scottish Parliament did not have the power to hold a referendum on the issue. It was a fact not wasted by the new leader of the SNP at Westminster, Stephen Flynn. He used it to challenge Rishi Sunak to change his mind and allow a referendum next October.

Mr Flynn's election as leader of the 45 SNP MPs at Westminster was not as uneventful as we all imaged last week. He was challenged at the last minute by Alison Thewliss, seen as Nicola Sturgeon's favoured candidate, and she came within 9 votes of winning. Two MPs have since resigned from the SNP's front-bench team. There are clearly signs of a split opening up between the gradualists on independence and those like Mr Flynn who want a more insistent approach.

Meanwhile, the Labour Party has published its latest plan for "devolution all round." It's the result of a constitutional commission led by Gordon Brown and he and Sir Kerr Starmer were in Edinburgh to launch what they hope will be a powerful answer to the SNP's campaign for independence. The plans includes greater borrowing powers for the Scottish government, a place on a beefed-up Council of the Nations and Regions and proportional representation in an elected upper chamber to replace the House of Lords.

There is also a promise to "level-up" Britain with more funding for regional mayors and the dispersal of 50,000 civil service jobs to the nations and regions. It's really more of the same from the party which prides itself on being the "party of devolution." But whether it will be enough to kill the independence movement "stone dead", as was once promised by Labour, is looking pretty unlikely.

Finally, Scotland's "other team" in the World Cup, Australia, was beaten by Argentina 2-1 last Saturday. No fewer than seven members of the Australian team, were either born in Scotland, like Jason Cummings and Martin Boyle, or play, or

have played, for Scottish premier division clubs. One of them Keanu Baccus, currently at St Mirren, was given the task of marking the best player in the world, Lionel Messi, who, of course, scored one of Argentina's goals. "It's surreal how good he actually is," said Baccus when he returned to Paisley. I wonder who he will be marking this Saturday when St Mirren play Hamilton, and how surreal he will be.