

# Letter from Scotland

**The year 2022 has been a bumpy year internationally and, even in quiet Scotland, we have felt the shock waves from war and pestilence and climate change. Not to mention the political turmoil in our neighbouring country.**

I suppose the most “historic” event that took place in Scotland this year was the death of the Queen at Balmoral in September. It sent the nation into a royalist trance, with people and tractors lining the roads, as her coffin made its way to Edinburgh, where 20,000 citizens queued for hours to file past their dear, long-serving monarch as she lay in state in St Giles Cathedral.

Her war-time quotation “We’ll meet again,” took us through the Covid pandemic. It’s hard to believe that last Christmas we were facing the omicron variant which forced another two-month lockdown and another threat to the economy. Thanks to the vaccine roll-out, the death toll has not risen much above the 16,000 mostly-elderly Scots who have died with Covid since it emerged from China in December 2019.



The coffin of HM The Queen, is transported by hearse from The Palace of Holyroodhouse to St Giles Cathedral where Her late Majesty lay at rest before travelling to London for the official funeral, 12 Sept 2022 © 2022 J.L. Preece

Climate change was not so much a threat in Scotland as a reminder that we are on the path to destruction. In January we had storms Malik and Corrie, followed by Dudley and Eunice in February. We had an unusually mild March and a dry spring and a warm summer. Europe, as a whole, had its driest summer for 500 years, while floods in Pakistan left a thousand people dead and three million homeless.

Nicola Sturgeon went to the UN conference on climate change in Egypt to plead with the international community to follow through on promises made at last year's conference in Glasgow. But Scotland itself is still not cutting its annual carbon emissions and the UK government is pressing ahead with new oil fields in the North Sea. Annoyingly, the year ended with a cold snap which saw temperatures falling to minus 10°C, and even minus 17°C in Braemar. Nature is playing with us like a cat before the kill.



The wheel of the year keeps turning, but not so gently.

Then there was war. Unthinkable in Europe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, or so we supposed, till crash, Putin invaded Ukraine on 24 February. 100,000 Ukrainian soldiers have been either killed or wounded, 20,000 civilians. Russian losses have been estimated at 80,000 killed or wounded. Three million refugees have fled, mostly to Poland. Around 20,000 have made their way to Scotland, two-thirds of them under The Scottish Government “super-sponsor” scheme.

The West has been timid in its response, frightened to “release the dogs of war” in case Putin is mad enough to turn to nuclear or chemical weapons. Instead, we have sent anti-missile systems and cold-weather gear to the brave Ukrainian troops and admired their resistance. There has also been a half-hearted boycott of Russian oil and gas, one of the causes of the next shock to hit us this year, the 10 per cent rise in the cost of living.

It wasn't the only cause, of course. The "cost of living crisis", we're told by the UK Government, is caused by the aftermath of the Covid pandemic, the trade war between China and the USA and by the rise in the global price of gas. What they don't mention is the disaster of Liz Truss's premiership and the damage done by Brexit. Leaving the EU has left us with a severe labour shortage, especially in Scotland, and with soaring food prices. According to researchers at the London School of Economics, food prices account for 3 per cent of the rise in the cost of living each year.

The result has been an autumn and winter of discontent. There's been strike action, or the threat of action, by public sector workers ranging from dustbin men and railway workers to teachers and nurses. And it's spread to the private sector, from Royal Mail staff to off-shore oil workers. The government is trying to hold the line at 5 – 7 per cent pay rises but that means a real-terms cut in wages, after years of "Tory austerity."

Nicola Sturgeon's government has been stuck in the middle, held to a fixed budget from Westminster but faced with understandable pay demands from workers. Both governments are to blame, in my view. Westminster for not taxing the richer half of the population as it should, to pay for decent public services. And the Scottish Government for not using the limited tax powers it has, notably council tax. There is substantial wealth out there in the form of rising property values and pension increases. And not mentioned much, is the need for a retirement levy to pay for a proper care service.



The Prime Minister Liz Truss in the House of Commons at Prime Minister's Questions on 12 October PHOTO UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor

The political effect of all these shocks to the system has been surprisingly small in Scotland. Support for independence in the opinion polls has grown slightly, to over 50 per cent, but only just. Most people here are appalled at the behaviour of the Johnson government, which finally came to its squalid end in July. But that was followed, unbelievably, by the shortest and most incompetent government in recent history. Liz Truss even made the money markets lose faith in "low-tax-high-growth" capitalism. The result was financial turmoil which forced the Bank of England to put up interest rates for all mortgage holders and credit card spenders. Now, with another round of austerity from the Rishi Sunak's government, we are set for another chapter of Dickens' "hard times".

For relief, we have turned to sport. Scotland wasn't much involved in the men's World Cup or in European competitions. But one of the great changes this year has been the breakthrough in popularity of women's football, and indeed

women's rugby. Our national football team are ranked 25<sup>th</sup> in the world and now attract a large enough crowd to use the hallowed national stadium at Hampden. The women's rugby team are ranked 10<sup>th</sup> in the world, though we'd better not mention their result against New Zealand in the World Cup back in October. Much better to mention the men's rugby team beating England at Murrayfield in the Six Nations competition in February.

Scots played their part in the British team at the Winter Olympics in Beijing, Eve Muirhead's team winning a gold medal in the curling. And at the Commonwealth Games in Birmingham in July, the Scotland team brought home a total of 51 medals, most notably the two golds by runners Laura Muir and Eilish McColgan.

It always surprises me at the end of the year how much has happened, how much I've forgotten. And it may be, like old telephone numbers, we need to forget them, in order to focus on the present and the future. The present is troublesome enough and the future....well there is always the hope it will be better.

See you next year.



Honours even at Easter Road as the game between Hibs Women and Hearts Women in front of a record crowd ends 1-1 in the SWPL but Hibs go on to lift the inaugural Women's Capital Cup by winning the game 5-4 on penalties.

Credit: Ian Jacobs