

Letter from Scotland

We are in such a mess that 2023 has just got to be better. We have the NHS on its knees, strikes on the railways and in our schools and universities.

The cost of living is soaring, poverty is on the rise, the climate is in revolt, a flu and Covid pandemic is never far away. And that's before we mention another war in Europe.

We are deep in Lake Wobegon and it's all of our own making. Scotland has not been unaffected. Let's start with climate change. We have just had our warmest year ever, with temperatures reaching 34°C and that's caused drought and flooding in unfortunate places. This week, for instance, the main railway line between Glasgow and London was closed at Carstairs when an embankment was washed away.



“It’s a mess of my own making.” Museum of Rural Life, Lanarkshire.

Not that there was much traffic on the line, because no trains were been running for most of the week, due to the UK-wide rail strike. There’s another round of rolling strikes in schools across Scotland as teachers continue to press their pay claim. Threatened strikes in hospitals, ambulance services, councils, the police and fire services have all been settled, more or less, around the 7 per cent level. But workers are disgruntled at what amounts to a pay cut, since prices are rising at 10 per cent.

Scottish ministers have shrugged their shoulders and blamed “UK Tory austerity”, saying the public services have been under-funded for a decade. There’s not much they can do in the short term, given the miserly block grant they receive from Westminster. So they are reduced to bemoaning the fact they can’t pay teachers a decent wage and accepting that hospital

waiting times are “unacceptable.”

Not to worry, this year will be better, according to the Prime Minister. Rushi Sunak has given us five pledges on which to judge him, all quite vague and easy targets, it has to be said: cut inflation, reduce the national debt, improve education and the NHS and pass a law to discourage illegal immigration. He might have mentioned his plan to take on the unions, Thatcher-style, with a law to insist on “minimum safety levels” during strikes in the public services. Labour’s Sir Keir Starmer said he would repeal such a law and followed that with a pledge to introduce “a decade of national renewal”, starting next year.

To me, all this looks like leadership of the Duke of Plaza-Toro kind, leading the regiment from behind and waiting to see how things transpire. Both Sunak and Starmer, and the SNP for that matter, need to face up to the reality that decent public services need to be paid for by taxing the wealthier three-quarters of the population. HMS Britain needs to be re-ballasted so that it sits more evenly in the water.

A glaring example is in social care, the root cause of the crisis in the NHS. The very wealthy can afford to pay for nursing homes of the finest kind. The rest of us are left to the mercy of our relatives or, worse, to take up hospital beds which should be freed for urgent cases from the struggling accident and emergency departments. For years, the politicians have ducked the obvious solution of setting up a National Care Service, properly funded by a 10 per cent levy on every citizen’s wealth at the point of retirement.

But hey, we all have our own solutions to the problems of the world. The difficulty is that not enough of us agree on any particular solution and then have the enthusiasm to put it into practice. And so we are left with hopes and predictions for the year ahead.

I don't have a great record in this regard. Last January I gave up making predictions and it's just as well. Reading "Letter from Scotland", written at the beginning of January last year, is like a flash-back to a different world. Covid was still rampant: shutdowns, face-masks, queues at vaccination centres, 20 per cent of people off work. There were fears that energy costs would rise by 50 per cent, that inflation would reach 4 or even 5 per cent. And the rumours of war in Eastern Europe were being dismissed or down-played.

So looking into the increasingly polluted mists of 2023 is a dangerous occupation. But I can make out the disturbing outlines of a continuing war in Ukraine, a fall in our standard of living and political stagnation – even on the tricky issue an independence referendum. I can't see us taking climate change seriously or getting back into the European Union (which we will have to eventually I think.)

There must though be better times ahead. Even in what Dickens' might have called the worst of times, we can hope that "something will turn up".



Rishi Sunak photographed in October 2022 when he was Chancellor of the Exchequer.