

Letter from Scotland

When an earthquake strikes, like the unfolding disaster on the Turkish/Syrian border, the rest of the world can only stand still in horror. We are suddenly reminded that we live on the fragile surface of an unstable planet. The pictures of the rescue effort, in freezing conditions, are truly appalling.

Here in Scotland we can only watch and sympathise and donate. The small Turkish community living here, of about 8,000 people, have been holding vigils and appealing for aid. Of the 3,000 Syrians, most are refugees from Assad's civil war which began in 2014.

Nicola Sturgeon has spoken of her shock at the "heart-rending scenes" coming out of the earthquake zone. The Scottish Government has pledged £500,000 towards the relief effort and a small team of experts from the Scottish Fire and Rescue Service has flow out to help in the search for survivors. It all seems so inadequate.



When the Earth shudders. Earthquake House, Comrie, Perthshire. Scotland led the effort in the 18th century to understand the science of earthquakes. Until then, they had largely been regarded as a sign that the gods were angry with us. The tiny "Earthquake House" at Comrie in Perthshire was built in 1874 to accommodate the first primitive seismometers to measure the tremors from the Highland fault line which runs through the village. Geology was a favourite subject for Scottish gentlemen after James Hutton published his "Theory of the Earth" in 1785 and indeed it still is.

Not half a mile from where I sit writing this, is Edinburgh University's School of Geosciences, where there have been geology professors since the 1770s. There are now over a hundred professors, researchers and lectures teaching 1100 undergraduates in 14 different aspects of earth science, from geology to atmospheric studies, carbon management, environmental protection, volcanology and, of course, seismology.

Earthquake disasters are not just the result of earth science, unfortunately, they are also man-made. If the block of flats and offices in Turkey had been more firmly built they might have stood up to the earthquake. Or if there hadn't been a civil war in Syria for the last eight years, the emergency services would have been in a better condition to save many more lives. So the human sciences of economics and politics are involved too. And thereby hangs a tale.

It seems almost irreverent to discuss our petty politics and economics here in Scotland when there is such huge suffering being broadcast on our television screens from the Middle East and from Ukraine. But, for the record, Scotland's politicians have spent much of the week squabbling over government spending cuts. In particular, the money given to our 32 district councils to run their schools, care services, waste collections and maintain their roads.

The councils say they've been given a real-terms cut in funding which will leave them £700m short and result in the loss of 7,000 jobs. The Scottish government says, due to Westminster cuts, it doesn't have any more money, and is already cutting other budgets to allow councils to offer a 5 per cent pay rise to teachers – an offer refused. That led the teachers' unions announcing this week that they will be continuing with their rolling strike action.

One of the other cuts the government has made this week is to the programme to up-grade the A9 road to Inverness. It's long been labelled Scotland's most dangerous road because it weaves about from dual carriageway to single carriageway at odd moments of the 110 miles between Perth and Inverness. The SNP manifesto promised to make it a dual carriageway through-out by 2025 but the transport secretary Jenny Galbraith had to admit that this was no longer achievable. She was careful not to mention any new date but pointed out that she is spending £5m on better signage.

If we can retreat into the world of sport for a moment, I could mention Scotland beating England 29-23 at last weekend's men's rugby international at Twickenham. But I'd better not, lest it lead to uncharacteristic Scottish self-confidence ahead of the next Six Nations match, against Wales on Saturday on the hallowed turf of Murrayfield.

What does it say about us humans, that we can carry on playing games or debating how we spend our money while others are facing disaster? It's not that we are completely selfish – we are donating to the earthquake appeal – it's just that life must go on. We learned during the Covid pandemic that we have to live with various crises as they occur. What we never seem to learn is to take care to avoid them in future.

