

Letter from Scotland

The best laid schemes of Scottish nationalists have gone agley in spectacular fashion and left them naught be grief and pain for promised joy.

So Robert Burns may have summed up the past two weeks. Nicola Sturgeon's sudden resignation has left the SNP, and the whole nation, in turmoil. We've been reduced to a chattering mob, fighting among ourselves over the most bizarre basket of issues – gender recognition, gay marriage and theological correctness.

First, Nicola should not have done this while I was out of the country on holiday. I came home feeling lost, without a leader who seemed so steadfast and competent in a shaky world. She'd taken us through the Covid pandemic and stood up for important values – equality, an end to government austerity, democracy.



Should she stay after all? Photo by Colin Fisher/Alamy Live
Indeed, on this anniversary of Putin's invasion of Ukraine, she has written an open letter to Ukrainians "in Scotland and across the world" expressing Scotland's support for "a speedy victory and a restoration which ensures peace and Ukrainian sovereignty, democracy, independence and territorial integrity." She goes on to assure the 23,000 Ukrainian refugees in Scotland that this can be their home for as long as they need it.

After eight years as First Minister and 15 years in ministerial office, and after winning eight elections in a row, she told a shocked press conference in Bute House that the time had come for her to [step down](#). "In my head and heart, the time is right." She spoke of the pressures of office, the sacrifice of a private life and the "brutality" of modern political discourse. She has run into thistly problems in recent months, to be sure, and some of her own making, like gender recognition reform, but nothing she couldn't have shaken off with a quick change of tack.

I think all she needed was winter holiday, but instead she has plunged the SNP into a soggy peat bog and jeopardised the cause of independence. Furthermore, there is no obvious successor to the brightest star the Scottish political theatre has ever produced.

There are three candidates in this peat bog leadership race. Humza Yousaf, the current health secretary. Kate Forbes the finance secretary, currently reaching the end of her maternity leave, and Ash Regan, who resigned from the government last year in protest at the gender recognition bill which allows people as young as 16 to choose to change their gender without a medical diagnosis.

Strangely enough, this minor change in law, which could affect a whole 0.5 per cent of the population, has become the transfixing issue of the campaign so far. The economy, the state of the NHS, school strikes, even independence, have hardly got a mention.

Kate Forbes came close to abandoning her leadership bid after she ran into criticism for saying she would not have voted for the gender recognition bill. More criticism followed from senior party colleagues, who should have behaved more kindly, when she revealed she would have voted against the gay marriage bill in 2014. Some even hinted her membership of the evangelical Free Church made her unfit to stand as first minister.

Humza Yousaf, whom the SNP establishment seem to favour, is a Muslim but he has managed to reconcile his faith with the liberal ethos of modern Scottish politics. However, he is in the dangerous position of being Health Secretary when the NHS is on its knees in prayer. A report out this week from Audit Scotland did not make easy reading for Yousaf campaigners. It found that his NHS recovery plan lacked detail, and was falling behind its targets.

All this will be chewed over in television debates and campaign meetings in the next four weeks until voting by the SNP's 100,000 members ends on 27 March.

Has anything else happened in Scotland this week? Only more school teacher strikes – this time targeted on ministerial constituencies. Only a government budget of £60 billion being passed, leaving local authorities so short of funds they are having to raise council tax by around 5 per cent.

And only the surprise [retirement](#) of the Chief Constable Sir Iain Livingstone, who like the first minister, says he's done the job for longer than any of his predecessors and it is time to hand on the baton (so to speak).

And, of course, we've picked our squad for the next Six Nations Rugby match against France in Paris on Sunday. Politics is not the only rough, muddy game this weekend.



From times past : Scotland v New Zealand, BT Murrayfield, Edinburgh, 18th Nov. 2017 Autumn Internationals Scotland 17 – New Zealand 22