

# Letter from Scotland

It's been a chilly start to March. Temperatures have hovered just above freezing during the day but at night they plunged to minus 16C in Altnaharra in the Highlands, making it the coldest March night for over 20 years.

Snow has covered much of the Highlands and the North East, closing schools and causing traffic disruption. But we've also had spectacular shows of the Northern Lights and a huge Lenten moon.

Just as we are playing fast and loose with the climate, so the climate is playing with us. The more we heat the Arctic, the more the Arctic hits back and we have this unusual weather.

Not that the climate gets much of a mention in the SNP leadership election, which is bewitching all the media channels at the moment. Humza Yousaf, Kate Forbes and Ash Regan have been throwing political snowballs at each other in a series of party meetings and television debates. The snow queen herself, Nicola Sturgeon, claims she is not watching the fight. She is probably hiding behind the sofa. At first minister's question time she has struggled to defend her

government from opposition charges that it's falling apart.



SNP Leadership candidate Kate Forbes at the Scottish Whisky Experience With Susan Morrison CEO Scotch Whisky Experience  
PHOTO Alan Simpson Photography

And you can see why. Kate Forbes says Humza Yousaf, as health secretary, has presided over a collapsing NHS. Mr Yousaf says Kate Forbes is rubbishing all the achievements of the SNP government over the past 16 years. Ash Regan says the other two are “wishy washy” over independence and the party has lost its way.

In the frantic battle to succeed Nicola Sturgeon, the candidates have been throwing many of her policies overboard, or at least casting doubt on them – the plastic bottle return scheme, the opposition to more oil and gas exploration, the fight with Westminster over the gender recognition bill, and even her preferred route to independence.



The Arctic hits back. Edinburgh from the Pentland Hills  
What disturbs me about these leadership campaigns – here in Scotland and recently at Westminster – is that they are becoming too presidential. Everything seems to depend on one individual who is expected to run the entire government. The



idea of cabinet responsibility is becoming old-fashioned. The First Minister is no longer just the chairperson of a committee of ministers, he or she is the leader who must be obeyed. So we have the casual formation of policies in the chaos of an election campaign, to please this or that faction, without careful consideration about how they will work out in practice. The Tories at Westminster are masters of this dubious art and Scotland is sliding down the same road to tyranny.

Meanwhile, the quiet Finance Secretary, John Swinney, has just got on with solving the pay disputes in the health, education, police and fire brigade services. He has managed to get everyone to settle for an average seven per cent rise this year and five per cent next year. So council workers, police and fire staff, most of the health service workers have accepted the deal. And this week it looks like the teachers will call off their next round of strikes and accept their union's recommendation that they should agree to what's on offer, even though it is a real-terms pay cut.



Deputy First Minister and temporary Cabinet Secretary for Finance and Economy, John Swinney MSP, delivers the Scottish Budget for 23-24 to the Scottish parliament.. 15 December 2022. Pic-Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

Meanwhile too, science marches on. And this week we saw how the advances in DNA testing can solve crimes 45 years after they were committed. Christopher Harrison (82) was found guilty at the High Court in Aberdeen for the murder of his ex-wife, Brenda Page, in 1978. Although he was arrested at the time, there wasn't enough evidence to prosecute him. But now, after modern DNA analysis and the re-interviewing of witnesses, the police have managed to get a conviction. Harrison will serve 20 years in prison. The irony is that Dr Page was a genetic scientist who, had she lived, would have been deeply involved in perfecting the very DNA science which led to her killer's conviction.

Finally, councillors in Edinburgh have been embarrassed to discover that a statue of a Roman warrior who had watched over their proceedings in the City Chambers since 1810, is no such thing. He is in fact Bonnie Prince Charlie. The case of mistaken identity was solved by close examination of an heraldic emblem on his shield and two crossed swords on his breastplate.

A sharp-eyed art historian, Alyssa Robertson, first raised the alarm and her suspicions have been confirmed by Professor Duncan Macmillan of Edinburgh University.

All of this is according to "The Scotsman" which I suppose we must now call "The Scotsperson". It follows another story from "The Scotsperson" that the "The Flying Scotsman", the steam engine, was manned/personed by a team of women footplate persons to mark International Women's Day.