

Letter from Scotland

“All the world’s a stage and men and women merely players.” I’ve been watching the week go by and imagining its various characters as actors in a Shakespearian “comedy” – an apparently light drama but one which has profound meaning.

Take, for instance, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Jeremy Hunt. This thin, bolt-upright man strode into the House of Commons on Wednesday to announce a budget of tax and spending worth billions of pounds. But without blinking, he found time to mention £1.5m for repairs to the 118-year old Cloddach Bridge, which happens to be in the Moray constituency of the Scottish Conservative Party leader Douglas Ross.



“All the world’s a stage.” The Edinburgh Festival gets a boost from the Chancellor. PHOTO john Knox

Oh, there was also £8.6m for the Edinburgh Festivals – maybe for a new headquarters for the Fringe? – and an extra £320m for the Scottish Government to spend as it wishes over the next three years.



Chancellor Jeremy Hunt presenting the Spring Budget 2023 PHOTO UK Parliament/Andy Bailey

He was happy to record that the economy is doing well, escaping a recession by the skin of its teeth. He brushed over the official forecast that living standards, for most of us, will fall by nearly 6 per cent over the next two years while the 10,000 highest earners will get a pension bonus of £835m.

But Mr Hunt wasn't the only character to occupy the stage this week. We were entertained, several times, by the three candidates hoping to replace Nicola Sturgeon as SNP leader and first minister.



Humza Yousaf

Humza Yousaf (37) is the establishment's favorite, having served as justice secretary

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Kate Forbes (32) is a feisty young woman, normally dressed in red. She was born in Dingwall and is a fluent Gaelic speaker. She attended Dingwall Academy, then Cambridge and Edinburgh universities. She's a qualified accountant and was catapulted into the job of finance secretary when Nicola Sturgeon needed someone urgently to replace a chap who had to resign in some disgrace. Recently she's been on maternity leave with her first child but has returned to the political fray with a mother's new energy. Her parents were missionaries in the Free Church of Scotland in India for a time and she is herself a member of the Free Church and therefore against gay marriage and the gender recognition reform bill. Though she accepts parliament's decisions on these matters, she has come into strong criticism from the SNP hierarchy, including Humza Yousaf. He himself has been asked to square his support for gay marriage and the gender recognition bill with his Muslim religion.



Kate Forbes

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The third candidate, Ash Regan (49), was best known at the start of the campaign for her resignation from the government over the gender recognition reform bill. She was born in Biggar in the Borders, went to Keele University and became a public relations officer in London. You can tell, by her smart appearance and clear speaking manner. She has two sons. When she returned to Scotland, she became head of campaigns for Common Weal, a left-wing think tank. She has no religious affiliation, unlike the other two candidates and her platform has been that the SNP should take the quick road to independence, using the next election as a mandate.



Harburn, Scotland, UK. 10 March 2023. PICTURED: Ash Regan MSP seen against backdrop of wind turbines at Harburnhead Wind Farm, near Edinburgh. Credit: Colin D Fisher/CDFIMAGES.COM

So there we have the candidates, in all their stage finery, gladly knocking bits out of each other at some fairly tempestuous party hustings and television “debates”. This

week, it's descended into calls for an independent Arbiter to oversee the election. The SNP hierarchy has not covered itself in glory over the organisation of the contest. At first it refused to allow press coverage of party hustings – that quickly had to be abandoned. Then it refused to release the number of party members who would be sent ballot papers. Eventually that number saw the light of day – 72,000, an embarrassing drop from 120,000 at the time of the independence referendum in 2014.

But that far outstrips the membership of any other party in Scotland – indeed it's almost as many as Conservative voters in the leadership election in the whole of the UK.

The candidates now have a few more days to strut their stuff before the curtain comes down on 27 March. The red velvet will part with a drum roll to reveal the impresario, Nicola Sturgeon. She will take her final bow and anoint the new leader to take the show on the road to independence or maybe somewhere else.