

Letter from Scotland

Easter morning sermons will talk of new beginnings – buds on trees, the life cycle of birds and bees, and hopes of better times for our own species. And when we're enjoying a few days holiday and watching children hunting for Easter eggs, it's possible to be hopeful.

Maybe the war in Ukraine will end this summer. Maybe President Biden's visit to Ireland will reinvigorate the Good Friday Agreement. Maybe we'll all do something about climate change. Maybe we'll rediscover a little faith in our political leaders.



Easter time in Princes Street gardens

I was shocked by the latest results of the “World Values Survey” which plots people’s confidence in their political systems. Only 17 per cent of people in Britain say they have confidence in the UK political system. That’s only just above Russia at 16 per cent, Nigeria at 15 per cent, France at 13 per cent and the US at 12 per cent. Even in well-adjusted countries, the figures are not great: Canada 36 per cent, Germany 36 per cent and Norway 42 per cent.

Here in Scotland, we’ve had a rocky few weeks. Humza Yousaf has only been leader of the SNP and First Minister for barely a fortnight but already he’s facing criticism for not including his close rival Kate Forbes in his new cabinet. And he’s had to order a spring clean in the party’s organisation.

This comes as the party’s former chief executive Peter Murrell was arrested on Wednesday and questioned about the “missing” £666,000 of party funds. Mr Murrell had to resign for

misleading the press over the number of party members in the run-up to Mr Yousaf's election. As if this were not enough, he is married to Nicola Sturgeon and together they have ruled the party for the last eight years – giving rise, of course, to demands for a bit of “glasnost and perestroika”.

So it was a case of “how are the mighty fallen” when we saw television pictures of their house in a pleasant part of Glasgow surrounded by blue tape and a police investigations tent erected on their front lawn. There may be nothing to it and Mr Murrell was later released without charge. But there's a lot of jumping to conclusions going on, and for the moment, it's all pretty unsettling.



First Minister Humza Yousaf after his swearing in at the Court of Session on 29 March 2023 ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter

We've also been unsettled this week by two shocking court cases. One involves a young couple from Leeds who came to Edinburgh for what looked like a romantic holiday in September 2021. But Kashif Anwar was found guilty of pushing his pregnant wife, lawyer Fawziyah Javed, off a cliff on Arthur's

Seat. She died almost immediately, but not before telling a police officer that her husband had been abusive, and had pushed her off the cliff when she threatened to leave him. He was sentenced to a minimum of 20 years in prison.

The other case was one of a young man given a community service order for raping a 13-year-old girl. Sean Hogg was 17 at the time and the judge Lord Lake said, under the sentencing guidelines, he had to take Hogg's age into account. He ordered him to do 270 hours of unpaid work instead of sending him to prison. There's been an outcry from opposition politicians and from Rape Crisis Scotland who have called for an urgent review of the guidelines.

Meanwhile, the usual disturbing headlines are breaching the peace – record hospital waiting times, growing poverty levels, cuts to local council services, the rising cost of living. In times of shock and hardship, people depend more on their national institutions – governments, councils, churches, and the monarchy.

With the coronation coming up on 6 May, Scotland's "Stone of Destiny" is being moved from Edinburgh Castle to Westminster Abbey to be placed beneath the coronation throne on which King Charles will regally and, no doubt, uneasily sit. This battered lump of red sandstone has been with us since 840AD and has served as a coronation stool for many a king since. According to legend it was originally used as a rather hard pillow by Jacob in the Book of Genesis.

It's now been subjected to a special 3D scan, in preparation for its journey to London, and lo and behold, the scan shows up previously unseen markings. Is it Roman lettering, the experts wonder, or is it just wear and tear? Or is the stone, speaking geologically, trying to tell us something about our destiny? That makes me even more uneasy.