

Letter from Scotland

The nearest we come to May Day parades in Scotland is the Beltane Festival on Calton Hill in Edinburgh.



Beltane Fire Festival 2022, Calton Hill, Edinburgh, 30th April 2022

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It's a burlesque version of the celebrations of spring in English cities, with their maypole dancing and hobby horse parades. It's not to do with International Labour Day, celebrated by workers across the world, from America to China, and certainly nothing to do with lines of soldiers, tanks and weapons of mass destructions in Putin's Russia. Instead it's

about nature and Celtic tradition.

Beltane harks back to the fire ceremonies of Druid times. The death and rebirth of the Green Man is re-enacted, symbolising the end of winter and the new beginning of spring. It's a powerful idea, captured by most of the world's religions, the idea of death and resurrection, the cycle of life, the cycle of the stars.

The ceremony on Calton Hill starts at 8pm on Sunday night and continues into the small hours of May Day morning. There's a May Queen, lots of fires and drumming, some 250 performers – actors, acrobats, clowns, puppeteers and 10,000 people, all standing and moving about, blurring the lines between performer and audience.



May blossom and blue skies. The end of winter gloom?
It's a far cry from what's been happening this week, here on Earth. 130,000 pupils have begun the exam season. Food prices

have gone up by 17 per cent in the last year. We've said goodbye to the boxing legend [Ken Buchanan](#).

For our first minister Humza Yousaf, it's meant a trip to London for his first face-to-face meeting with the prime minister Rishi Sunak. It was a polite meeting, of course. They are both polite men. But there were plenty of differences – over an independence referendum, the drinks bottle recycling scheme, the gender recognition bill, the 10 per cent rise in whisky tax.

Back home, Mr Yousaf is still struggling to unite his party after the departure of Nicola Sturgeon. She appeared in parliament for the first time as an ordinary MSP on Tuesday. She said the events of the past few weeks have been her “worst nightmare”. Unease and frustration was written all over her face as she said the police inquiries did not allow her to explain the arrest of her husband and the SNP party treasurer over the “lost £600,000” and the purchase of a £100,000 campervan.

Meanwhile the “normal” business of parliament trundled on with the publication of the government's plans to abolish the “Not Proven” verdict in the Scottish courts. This alternative to “Guilty” or “Not Guilty” has existed in Scots Law since the 1600s but it's come in for criticism in recent years for relieving the jury of their responsibility and satisfying neither the victim nor the accused.

The plans also include reducing the number of jurors from 15 to 12 and requiring at least 8 to reach a verdict instead of a simple majority. Even more controversially it's also suggested that rape cases should not be tried by a jury at all but by a judge sitting alone. We can expect a long and heated argument over all of this.



Pedal on Parliament

Out on the streets, the minister for active travel, the Green MSP Patrick Harvie has been announcing big plans for cycling. It's part of his increased budget for active travel, up from £200 million to £320 million or 10 per cent of the total transport budget. He appeared on his bike at the "Pedal on Parliament" parade on Saturday, riding upright in his tweed suit and open necked shirt, he could have been a farmer on his way to market in the 1920s. His message to the rally was that the Greens were holding the government to its commitment to take cycling seriously.



Pedal on Parliament from Chambers Street to Holyrood The campaign began in 2012 PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter The festival next weekend will be for the King's coronation. It's going to be a largely local and private affair, with the odd street party and coronation ball. Big screens are going up in Edinburgh's Princes Street Gardens and at Glasgow Cathedral. But the celebrations are likely to be less enthusiastic than in England, with Scottish views on the monarchy decidedly mixed. An Ipsos opinion poll at the end of last year found 28 per cent of Scots thought the nation would be better off with a monarch and 26 per cent though it would be worse off. The rest were undecided.

Then in the summer, the biggest festival of all takes to the stage. The programme for the 76th Edinburgh International Festival was rehearsed on Monday like a vigorous cadenza by the new director, the violinist Nicola Benedetti. For three weeks in August, we will be treated to a zany collection of performances to rival the madness of the Beltane. Shows like Kurt Weill's "Threepenny Opera", a National Theatre play about

women wrestlers at the Highland Games, Bartok's "Bluebeard's Castle", along with traditional material from Mozart, Wagner and Dvorak. There will be plenty of shows for children among the 252 events, a "youth-take-over-day at the Hub and more concerts in local community centres and hospitals.

And all this from our own Nicola Benedetti, the first Scot and the first woman to be festival director. The festival slogan she's chosen echoes Martin Luther King by asking: "Where do we go from here?" The immediate answer is we go to the Fringe, which is an even bigger festival.



Nicola Benedetti, CBE, the Director of Edinburgh International Festival announcing her first programme for the 2023 Edinburgh International Festival PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter