

Letter from Scotland

The coronation this weekend may well reveal that King Charles' "United Kingdom" is less than the sum of its parts.

The four separate nations of the UK, not to mention the nine regions of England, are all taking on a life of their own these days. Riding all the shire horses at the same time will be more challenging for the King than it was for this mother.

The coronation celebrations in Scotland will be more muted than in England, fewer street parties, no great parades, only a couple of big screens in Edinburgh and Glasgow to allow crowds to watch the London pageantry. And this reflects the cooler public opinion of the monarchy. The latest opinion poll, from YouGov, found that support for the monarchy last month was 46 per cent in Scotland, compared to 58 per cent in England.



Mixed feelings about the coronation, even on the Royal Mile. The polls also reveal that those who support Scottish independence are even more republican. To some extent the issues are linked, with the monarchy being identified with the UK and thus blamed for “imposing Brexit and Tory austerity” on Scotland.

This week our first minister Humza Yousaf signalled yet another divergence from the UK road. He used his Anti-Poverty Summit to hint at higher taxes on the rich to pay for more targeted help for the poor. And he cited his own case: “Should other people be paying for my 14-year-old daughter’s ‘free’ school meals when I am earning a First Minister’s salary?”

By asking the question, he is threatening two sacred cows: higher taxes (annoying Conservatives) and targeting state aid (annoying Labour). And it has sparked a debate over whether the SNP should fulfil its commitment to free school meals for

all pupils, not just in primary school but in secondary school as well.

His SNP government also appears to be re-thinking its plan to designate 10 per cent of Scotland's seas no-fishing zones. Six of the SNP's coastal MSPs have rebelled against the idea, one, Fergus Ewing, even tearing up the consultation paper during an impassioned speech in parliament. The net-zero secretary Màiri McAllan has promised that marine protected areas will not be imposed on local communities. The Greens, however, who are in coalition with the SNP, will be watching carefully for any back-sliding. They say fish stocks are in a perilous state and an experimental no-fishing zone in Arran has resulted in a dramatic improvement in sea-life, including the number of fish, crabs and lobsters.

The principals of Scotland's 19 universities and 26 colleges woke up on Tuesday morning to the dismaying news that they are no longer to get the extra £46 million promised in the government's budget. The Minister Graeme Dey later explained it was because of the 5 per cent pay increase needed to end the school teachers' strike. Meanwhile, the universities are facing their own pay dispute with their lecturers who are beginning another round of strike action.

And oh dear, there's more trouble on the ferries. The Pentalina lost power and ran aground on Saturday evening as it was coming into St Margaret's Hope in Orkney. The local lifeboat was called out to rescue the 60 passengers on board. Alarmingly, the vessel had only been granted its latest safety certificate 11 days before. It was however back in service four days later, so its replacement, the Alfred, could go off to the Western Isles, where it has just been chartered by Caledonian MacBrayne to fill in for the two new ferries still not completed at Ferguson's shipyard on the Clyde. It's as tangled a tale as a badly coiled rope.

Happily, the news wasn't all disheartening this week. Some

14,000 people turned out to take part in the annual "Kiltwalk", raising funds for over 800 charities. Despite a wet Sunday they squelched along various routes, ranging from 23 miles from Glasgow Green, 14 miles around Clydebank, to "a wee wander" of 3 miles at Loch Lomond. And up in St Andrews, hundreds of students took part in the traditional May Day Swim at the east beach, to prepare themselves for their exams. What a healthy nation!

Finally, we had a visitation this week from the "Scottish president" Donald Trump. And we were immediately in Lewis Carroll's mad world of "cabbages and kings". "Oour Donald" really is the pantomime version of a king. Was he here to challenge the coronation of King Charles ? No, he was here to inspect his two loss-making golf courses, one at the Menie estate, south of Stonehaven, and the other at Turnberry on the Ayrshire coast. His nine car entourage then when off to Ireland without incident.

But he left behind this thought: perhaps we had better not give up our old fashioned monarchy, if we are going to have presidents like Trump, or worse still, Putin.