

Letter from Scotland

My hill-walking expedition to Loch Ossian last weekend gave us weather for both summer and winter. One day it was glorious sunshine, wonderful views and light winds. But that was soon chased away next day by mist, showers and a nasty cold wind. Typical for Scotland.

Multiply that up into “climate” and we have this week’s warning from the World Meteorological Organisation of volatile conditions ahead, a 66 per cent chance of the global average temperature passing the crucial 1.5°C increase since pre-industrial times. It will mean more floods and droughts, more storms and hurricanes, more ice melt and rising sea levels. Unless we cut our carbon emissions drastically in the next five years.

While at Loch Ossian I learnt that the Corroul Estate is playing its part in cutting those CO₂ emissions. Under its Swedish owners, the estate has built four run-of-river hydro-power systems which provide enough electricity to run all the buildings on the estate and 2,000 other homes via the national grid. A similar scheme began operating in Glen Noe near Loch Etive in 2021 and other small-scale schemes are being built or planned.



“Power from the glens.” Loch Ossian, Corroun, Rannoch Moor. They follow in the great tradition of the post-war Labour government’s “power from the glens” programme when 14,000 men lived in huts across the Highlands building 78 dams and 54 hydro power stations. Despite all our efforts, then and now, there is still a long way to go to reach The Scottish Government’s target of generating 50 per cent of all our energy from renewable sources by 2030.

Hydro power provides just 12 per cent of our electricity. And electricity is only 21 per cent of our total energy needs – heat and transport make up the rest and they are still powered by gas and oil. Because we have delayed so long, there is now only seven years to do a great deal of de-carbonising. You would think our political leaders would be warning us of our fate and passing laws and spending money to address the climate emergency. But they lack the courage to make the “hard choices” on the scale necessary. Instead, they hope something

technological will turn up and meanwhile continue drilling for oil.

We have another example of political cowardice in the sorry state of our 32 local councils. This week the Accounts Commission warned that services such as social care, housing, waste re-cycling, libraries are in danger of collapsing unless more resources are found. It says the 5.2 per cent increase in Scottish government funding is not enough. The councils themselves say they are short of £1 billion just to keep current services running.

Local councillors have themselves to blame for not increasing council tax to anything like the level in England. If they were to catch up, they would have that extra £1 billion they need. But no, they settled for a rise of around 5 per cent, half the rate at which their costs are increasing. And at the national level, the SNP have been guilty of freezing council tax for many years and failing to explore the huge store of gold to be found in wealth taxes. My own favourite is a retirement levy to pay for social care.

Caledonian MacBrayne, the state-owned ferry company, is another example of under-funding which sailed over the horizon this week. It emerged that its fleet of ships serving 22 islands off the west coast is getting so old that the repair bill for the last five years has reached over £100 million. Old boats, some of them 30 years old, are continually breaking down, leaving islanders cut off or severely inconvenienced for days.



Cabinet Secretary for Wellbeing Economy, Fair Work and Energy, Neil Gray

Meanwhile, two new ferries being built at Ferguson's shipyard on the Clyde are running years behind schedule and three times over budget. Neil Gray, the minister currently in charge, found himself in the extraordinary position on Tuesday of telling parliament he had ordered Ferguson's to carry on building the second of the two vessels, even though it would be cheaper to scrap it and order a new one from abroad. Mr Gray explained himself by saying it would take four years to have a new ship built in a foreign yard and it was important to keep skilled jobs at Ferguson's for the future of the yard.

Do the problems of living in your country make you anxious? They have certainly made a million Scots anxious, according to a survey for the Mental Health Foundation. They polled a thousand adults. And some 58 per cent of them reported feeling so anxious that it had affected their daily lives. 33 per cent said they worried about paying their household bills. But 44 per cent said they kept their feelings to themselves.

We are Scots, after all. And maybe a bit of tension is a good thing in our lives.