

Letter from Scotland

Last week, by pure chance, I happened to be in the bird hide at Loch of Lowes just as the second osprey chick spread his wings and took to the sky for his very first flight. What a magical moment.

It set me thinking about the state of nature and what we are doing to the planet. And this in a week when southern Europe and large parts of America and China are burning in the heat of climate change.

We are lucky in Scotland. We still have a green landscape and fresh air. But our climate is getting warmer. We've just had the hottest June on record. I can't help thinking that's partly why half of the 6,400 species surveyed in Scotland are in decline. I wonder too if it's got anything to do with the bird flu outbreak which has seen over a thousand dead birds washed up on Aberdeenshire beaches in the last few days. And if it's played a role in the beaching of 55 pilot whales in the Hebrides, one of the biggest mass strandings ever seen in Scotland.



Our green and pleasant land. Loch of Lowes. Perthshire. The issues of climate change and biodiversity have certainly moved up our human agenda in the last few weeks. There's a political divide over whether Scotland should be opening the last of its off-shore oil and gas fields. There have been protests outside the Grangemouth oil refinery. The Scottish Government has been accused of backsliding on its

environmental commitments – over duelling the A9 road to the Highlands, marine protected areas and plastic bottle recycling.

On biodiversity, the government's target is to halt species decline by 2030 and reverse it by 2045. But the £65 million allocated to the Nature Restoration Fund seems small and rather hopeful. However, the ospreys have made a start, there are now 300 breeding pairs. Beavers are back, wild cats are being re-introduced and red squirrels are being protected in the northern half of the country.

But whether there can be a turn-around in big industries like transport, energy and agriculture is more than a £65 million question. None of the main political parties are prepared to answer it, which raises one of the dilemmas of democracy. If you ask “the people” are they in favour tackling climate change and species decline, the answer is Yes. But when you ask them are they in favour of doing something about it, the answer is No.

The Labour Party this week ran into just such a dilemma. The UK leader Sir Keir Starmer declared on television that he is in favour of reducing child poverty. But not yet, the economy must grow first. He was referring to the curious rule, introduced by the Conservatives, which means that child benefit payments are restricted to a family's first and second child only. If families have more children, the parents are encouraged to go out to work instead.

Who brings up the children is not clear. The Child Poverty Action group estimates that 250,000 children across the UK are left in poverty as a result of the two-child cap. The House of Commons library estimates it as 20,000 in Scotland.

The Scottish Labour Party has tried valiantly to square the circle by saying the Tories have left the economy in such a mess that there is simply no way of paying the £1.3 billion it

would cost to remove the cap. They seem to have forgotten about the magic money tree which was discovered during the Covid pandemic and to have overlooked the possibility of asking the wealthy half of the country to pay more in tax.

The SNP say the issue shows there's little to choose between Labour and the Tories. The first minister Humza Yousaf said Labour sticking to the two child cap was shameful and unforgivable. He points to the Scottish government's separate child payment of £25 a week to try to tackle child poverty and make up for Westminster cuts.

Mr Yousaf faced his own dilemma this week when he was asked if Scotland would step in and stage the Commonwealth Games in 2026, now that Victoria in Australia has pulled out. Of course, he would like to help but it cost £543 million to hold the games in Glasgow in 2014. He hinted, maybe it's time the games were shared among several nearby nations.

Yes, there are sometimes issues too big for nations to tackle on their own, like climate change. But they are never too big for individuals, as two young boys from Turriff in Aberdeenshire have been demonstrating this week.

Ollie Ferguson (13) and his brother Harry (11), with a little help from their father, have built two model boats which are being shipped out to the Falkland Islands to sail all around Antarctica. They will drift in the swirling currents for two years, gathering data on climate change and sending it back to base.

It's a wonderful example of citizen science and it beautifully captures the adventures of the early polar explorers which has inspired the boys. Let's hope there is still ice at the Earth's poles when these two young scientists have grown up and flown the nest, like that osprey at the Loch of Lowes.