

Letter from Scotland

“A festival of violence.” No, not the arts festival in Edinburgh, now in full swing, but the grouse shooting season, according to the Scottish Green Party. This “other festival” got under way on the “Glorious Twelfth” but this year’s shooting parties out on the moors may be the last unlicensed events. And thereby hangs a tale.

The Green’s rural affairs spokesperson Ariane Burgess MSP says grouse shooting is a “cruel and outdated hobby” and the bill now going through the Scottish parliament is aimed at controlling it, if not ending it. The Greens insist it is a vital part of their coalition agreement with the SNP.



Feathers fly on Scotland's grouse moors. The Wildlife Management and Muirburn Bill looks like becoming just the latest wrecking ball to hit the "Bute House" agreement which holds the current Scottish government together. It's already under strain over issues such as marine protected areas, the roll-out of the plastic bottle recycling scheme and the progress towards climate change goals.



Shooting butts on a grouse moor

The Greens and other environmentalists say grouse shooting estates are bad for the countryside. They pollute the planet and damage precious peatbogs through “muirburn” – the practice of burning patches of heather to encourage new growth and reduce “vermin”. They encourage the trapping, poisoning and shooting of foxes, hares, badgers and rare birds of prey. And the grouse moors take up land that could be used for tree-planting and re-wilding.

The landowners, on the other hand, say Scotland’s 300 grouse moors actually conserve wildlife. They say the evidence is that in well managed estates, there are not only more red grouse, but also more black grouse, hen harriers, golden eagles, lapwings and curlews. Besides, grouse shooting is a major source of income and jobs for the Highlands, £350m a year and 11,000 jobs. Gamekeepers, they say, are the experts at conserving nature and don’t need bureaucratic regulation.

The government is going to have a tricky job devising a licensing system for shooting, muir-burning and trapping that satisfies both parties, or can even work successfully. And as we found out over the ban on foxhunting, wildlife and land use are emotional issues which set "town" against "country" and class against class.

We like to think of Scotland as a classless society but when Keir Starmer, the UK Labour Party leader came to Scotland this week he promised to "smash the class ceiling which holds working people back." He went on to promise that Scotland would be the "beating heart of a new Britain." And in particular he had in mind the transition from oil and gas to green energy, which he said would bring thousands of new jobs north of the border.

He was campaigning in the Rutherglen and Hamilton West constituency where there's likely to be a by-election in the autumn. Labour simply has to win it, if it's to stage its long-promised come-back in Scotland. The opinion polls are looking more cheerful for Labour these days. The latest, by YouGov, found support for Labour was up to 32 per cent, while SNP's support dropped to 36 per cent.

It will be interesting to see if Labour's new-found green agenda, banning new oil and gas developments for example, will stand the test of public opinion in Rutherglen and Hamilton West. The SNP have been soft-peddling on the issue in recent weeks, just as it has on plastic bottle re-cycling and protected marine areas.

A letter, signed by 26 environmental organisations, was sent this week to all five main political parties in Scotland urging them not to backslide on their climate change commitments in an effort to win popular opinion ahead of the next general election. They say political parties have "a moral obligation" to lead on climate change and nature conservation.

This week there was another sign that the summer is coming to an end. Children “with their shining morning faces are creeping, like a snail, unwillingly to school.”

And their teachers are hearing that things are going to be awkward this term, with strikes by auxiliary staff looming in mid-September. The GMB union has called strikes in 10 local council areas for two days and two other unions are thought likely to join the action. They are demanding an increase in the current 5.5 per cent pay offer.

So while, the Edinburgh Festival whistles along and Glasgow stages the World Pipe Band Championships, the rest of our life is returning to normal with all its problems, or as I suppose we should call them, challenges.



Brotipo Clown Show at 2023 Edinburgh Festival Fringe. A clown show that has delighted adults and children from Mexico to China begins its international farewell tour at this year's Edinburgh Fringe. Brotipo (correct), by Quebec-based multiple international award-winners Les Foutoukours, is a laughter-filled celebration of life, friendship and the joy of being

together. It's also starting during International Clown Week (1 to 7 August 2023) and is a great way to celebrate. Pictured clowning around on Edinburgh's Salisbury Crags (with a view of Arthur's Seat) are clown performers / creators Rémi Jacques (top) and Jean-Félix Bélanger.

Photography – www.colinhattersley.com