

Letter from Scotland

“Where do we go from here ?” That’s the question left hanging in the air as the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe packs up after its 76th season.

It was the challenge set at the beginning of the festival by its new director, the violinist Nicola Benedetti. She wasn’t just talking about next year’s programme, or the coming Hogmanay festival, it was a deeper question about where our society is going – “towards chaos or community?”



Our crazy festival season comes to an end.

The arts, she argued, take us “beyond our ordinary lives” and encourage us to think of larger issues. Should we just drift towards a chaotic world, disillusioned with politics and governments, giving up on climate change, allowing an underclass to fall into poverty ? Or should we act together to build the New Jerusalem?

Among the 3,500 events, there have been thoughtful plays, writers discussing progressive ideas, inspiring music and clever satirical comedy. But the Festival is not all about serious contemplation. It’s also about the fun and frolics of street performers and people enjoying themselves in crowded pubs and restaurants.

And making money. The takings are still being counted but, if last year is anything to go by, the Festivals will have brought in over £400 million to Edinburgh and £300 million to the rest of Scotland. Indeed, the creative industries as a whole in Scotland employ 70,000 people, according to the latest Scottish Government figures.



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

This too is part of Benedetti's argument – that by investing in the arts, both the economy and the general “wellbeing” of Scotland benefit. She's been a campaigner for music lessons in schools and in taking music out to a wider community. We now have six “Sistema” orchestras in Scotland working with young school pupils in deprived areas of Glasgow, Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen and Stirling.

So far, we've not seen the political parties in Scotland take Benedetti's overtures seriously. Even at the leaders' interviews on the Iain Dale talk show at the Fringe, the talk was all about the usual troubles of the day. All of them were blamed on the SNP or the Greens by Labour and the Conservatives and, occasionally by dissidents within the SNP itself, Highland seers like Fergus Ewing, Kate Forbes and Angus MacNeil.

It's not been a great week for The Scottish

Government. Although the latest drug death figures are down by 20 per cent from the previous year, but the rate is still the worst in Europe. There was bad news on the west coast ferries fiasco – there's to be a further delay to the two desperately-needed ferries being built on the Clyde.

Strikes are looming in schools and universities by ancillary staff demanding better pay. Child care agencies are saying they cannot provide the government's promised hours per week without more funding. On Thursday there were demonstrations by fire service workers and police officers who are protesting against cuts in staff numbers and calling for a pay rise of 8 per cent.



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Picture Alan Simpson

Police Federation staged a Picket at the Cosla headquarters Edinburgh.

The First Minister Humza Yousaf blames "Tory austerity in London" and says he has to balance the books within a limited devolved budget. Labour and the Conservatives largely ignore that point, being too embarrassed to outline what they would do.

As if the national budget was not enough for Mr Yousaf to worry about, the news came through this week that the SNP's own accounts are showing a deficit of £800,000 and that the membership has fallen from over 100,000 to 72,000. That's still way above any other party but it's worrying for the party managers, as the opinion polls are showing a narrowing of the gap between the SNP and Labour. Still, the party has a new chief executive. Well actually, the old communications director, Murray Foote, who resigned earlier this year, as the Sturgeon era was coming to an end. He'll be having a busy autumn.

Now that the Festivals are almost over, the students will soon be back in Edinburgh in time for their busy autumn. But most of us have returned to work already, in journalism, politics, schools, and football stadiums.

King Charles, however, is just beginning his holiday at Balmoral. On Monday, he was given a formal welcome to Deeside by the kilted 5th Battalion of the Royal Regiment of Scotland. It's almost a year since his mother died there and I wonder what Charles is thinking about his first year in office. "Where do we go from here?"