

Letter from Scotland

It's nearly six months since Humza Yousaf became Scotland's First Minister and this week's launch of his Programme for Government gave us a chance to see what he's made of, chalk or cheese. He used his chalk to draw a route map on the blackboard but will it all melt away like soft cheese?

I suppose we must admire anyone who steps up to be a political leader when we face such huge problems: a fifth of the population living in poverty, the NHS, social care and council services in crisis, tough climate change choices, pay disputes, faulty concrete in public buildings, chronic under-investment in ferries, divisions in his own party...the list goes on.



Can he save us from oblivium ? First Minister Humza Yousaf on the steps of Bute House.

When Mr Yousaf took over from Nicola Sturgeon he was seen as the continuity candidate. But in fact, he has backed away from the radicalism of the Sturgeon years. He has paused the bottle recycling scheme, the marine protected areas and the outright opposition to all new oil developments. He has announced a New Deal for business, in which he is trying to involve companies in a “welfare economy” of green jobs.

It was surprising therefore that he was so radical in his Programme for Government. Tackling poverty was the big idea. There was an extra £400 million for the Scottish Child Payment. He stuck to the SNP manifesto pledge to extend free child care to all 2 year olds and free school meals for all primary school children. He said that was the way to get more women into the workforce and thus boost the economy. So too would increasing the pay of the many women (and men) working in nursery and social care, from £11 an hour to £12.

But in the short term, these are going to be expensive

policies and difficult to fulfil in practice. He hinted that income tax would have to be increased in December's Budget to pay for it all.

That however was the only large-scale item in the Programme for Government. There were the odd million-pound announcements on such things as help for parents who struggle to afford fresh food and those who have lost babies through miscarriages. And he's to consider a ban on single-use vaping devices. Otherwise, the 14 bills he listed for the parliament to work on over the next year were all previously announced reforms in areas ranging from agriculture to rented housing and the court service.

What was endearing was how he tied many of his policies to his personal experience of growing up in an immigrant family in Glasgow and as a Muslim in Scotland. He is deadly serious about his social agenda of creating a more equal and tolerant society. He himself is a mild man, dealing reasonably with the details of government, rather than the dream of independence.



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At a large “Believe in Scotland” rally outside the Scottish Parliament last weekend, he spoke more in sorrow than in anger about the disadvantage of remaining in the United Kingdom. Brexit, he said, “was a national tragedy.”

All in all, I’m not sure Humza Yousaf is enough of a firebrand to break the stalemate on independence. It seems stuck on 47 per cent in favour 52 per cent against and 5 per cent undecided. Mind you, neither the Conservatives or Labour have been able to break the stalemate either, yet both put the issue at the heart of their election campaigns, at the same

time as accusing the SNP of being obsessed by it.

If everyone is obsessed by independence, then it might explain why we have been so late in realising the danger posed by the use of so-called RAAC concrete in our public buildings back in the 60s, 70s and 80s. It emerged this week that experts have been worried for years that this form of light-weight concrete used in floors and roofs was susceptible, over time, to dampness and corrosion around the metal reinforcements.

Over 100 schools in England are affected. In Scotland 40 schools and nine universities and at least four NHS buildings have been identified as having a problem and parts of the buildings have been taken out of use. It looks like the beginning of a huge and expensive problem.

It raises the question of how many long-term problems we are failing to act upon. Take climate change, for instance, hardly mentioned in the Programme for Government. Yet this week we have had a reminder of it, in an unusual spell of warm, sunny weather – temperatures reaching 25C and the last patch of snow in the UK disappearing off Braeriach in the Cairngorm for only the tenth time in 300 years and most of them in the last six years.

It's all too easy to come to the conclusion that our civilisation is doomed. Maybe in a few thousand years, archaeologists will be scraping away the top soil to study our energy systems and RAAC infested buildings, trying to work out how we lived and where we went wrong.

Just like the archaeologists from Glasgow University have been doing on the island of Arran over the summer. A Neolithic "cursus" has been discovered on a hillside overlooking Machrie Moor. It's been described an enormous structure of parallel stones and earth banks, half a mile long, the largest ever found in the UK. No one quite knows it's purpose.

I wonder what those ancient Britons, had as their Programme

for Government.