

Letter from Scotland

The winds of October have blown in an earthy scent of political campaigning. The party leaders have become desperate men – and they are all men – anxious to please voters in the run-up to next year's general election.

Like Desperate Dan they've been striding across the stage at party conferences, and doing the rounds of television studios and taking to the streets in by-elections, like the one yesterday in Rutherglen and Hamilton West.

Labour's victory there, winning 58 per cent of the vote to the SNP's 27 per cent, has put a jaunty stride into the party's campaigning in Scotland. Local schoolteacher Michael Shanks becomes the second Labour MP in Scotland. It looks like the beginning of a Labour comeback across the UK and Sir Keir Starmer who is expected to come to Scotland on Friday hailed the result as "seismic."



Desperately campaigning. Desperate Dan in his home town of Dundee.

But let's not lose sight of the comparison between Desperate Dan and the party leaders: Humza Yousaf, Rishi Sunak, Sir Keir Starmer, and Amas Anwar, the Labour leader in Scotland. Desperate Dan, you may remember from our Scottish childhood, was the comic-book hero who could lift a cow with one hand and solve problems with the other. In the online world of the Dandy Comic, he's been modernised to give him less of a tummy and a more chiseled chin. But he has a bungling air, beset by circumstances. And this, surely, is the modern take on men in general and politicians in particular.

Local transport regeneration, a smoke-free generation, and a new Advanced British Standard qualification.

All long-term decisions for a brighter future.
pic.twitter.com/ULqVLR84ft

– *Conservatives (@Conservatives)* [October 4, 2023](#)

This week we were treated to some classic examples. Rishi Sunak was so desperate to be popular he cut the long-established project to modernise Britain's railways, halting the high-speed line at Birmingham instead of Manchester. And this was after telling us for most of the week that he would not rush into making long-term decisions.

Sir Keir Starmer couldn't quite decide if this was a good decision or not, but he certainly won't reverse it. He made a similar double-sided statement last week over the granting of a licence to the Rosebank oil field off Shetland. I look forward to watching his fence sitting act on other issues this week at the Labour Party Conference in Liverpool.

The SNP will gather for their conference in Aberdeen the week after next and Humza Yousaf faces his own dilemmas. The party is increasing split over green issues, town versus country, and the route to independence. And this week, as well as the disaster in Rutherglen, other troublesome issues came tumbling out of the newsrooms.

What a result! Congratulations to Labour's newest MP- [@MGShanks](#). He will be a great servant of his community.

To everyone who helped make this happen- the Labour family & the families of Rutherglen & Hamilton W- thank you! We will deliver the change our country so deeply needs. pic.twitter.com/eYmFmT7wyf

– *Anas Sarwar (@AnasSarwar)* [October 6, 2023](#)

Our prisons are woefully overcrowded. The Justice Minister Angela Constance revealed that the number of prisoners has grown 9 per cent in the last year to reach nearly 8,000, one

of the highest rates of imprisonment in Europe. Half of our prisons are over capacity. A quarter of prisoners are not guilty, waiting on remand for an average of 139 days. There are predictions that the situation will get worse next year. The government has encouraged judges to speed up cases and to have a presumption against short term imprisonment. The courts are simply not making enough use of community sentences or electronic tagging.

The fight against poverty is not going well. A report from the Joseph Rowntree Foundation found that a million Scots are living in “relative poverty”, and 500,000 of them are living in “very deep poverty”. It blames rising housing costs, cuts to welfare benefits and low wages. Most, but not all, are the fault of the UK government.

From the SNP’s point of view, the UK government is increasingly interfering in Scottish affairs. This week, there was a “levelling up” plan to give seven Scottish towns £2million a year to spruce up their high streets (Greenock, Irvine, Kilmarnock, Coatbridge, Clydebank, Dumfries and Elgin). [And there was a promise to spend some of the “savings” from cutting the HS2 rail line on improvements to the A75 road between Gretna and Stranraer. Humza Yousaf has welcomed the funding, through gritted teeth.](#)

Even the SNP’s campaign against fox-hunting has run into a thicket. The Scottish Parliament’s original law banning traditional fox hunts contained a loop-hole which allowed a pack of dogs to flush a fox from cover so that it could be shot “humanely” by marksmen. So an effort to tighten the law came into effect this week, restricting the number of dogs to just two. Several packs of foxhounds have been disbanded as a result. But some farmers, gamekeepers and vets are arguing that shooting a fox often results in wounding and a slow painful death, rather than a quick dispatch by a pack of hounds. The issue continues to divide townsfolk from country folk.

Politicians must sometimes feel desperately trapped by their circumstances. Like the man on the A803 to Kirkintilloch on Sunday evening who was trapped in his new electric MG car, travelling at 15 mph towards disaster without any breaks. While steering as carefully as he could, he phoned the police, who eventually caught up with him and allowed him to ram into the back of their police van and gradually slow him to a stop. Desperate Dan would be proud of them.