

# Letter from Scotland

Before the second storm of the season blew in, Storm Babet, I cycled out to Ratho along the Union Canal.

It was a beautiful autumn day with the low sun shining through the trees and glinting on the water. It was easy to think that "God's in his heaven and all's right with the world." But, of course, it wasn't to last.

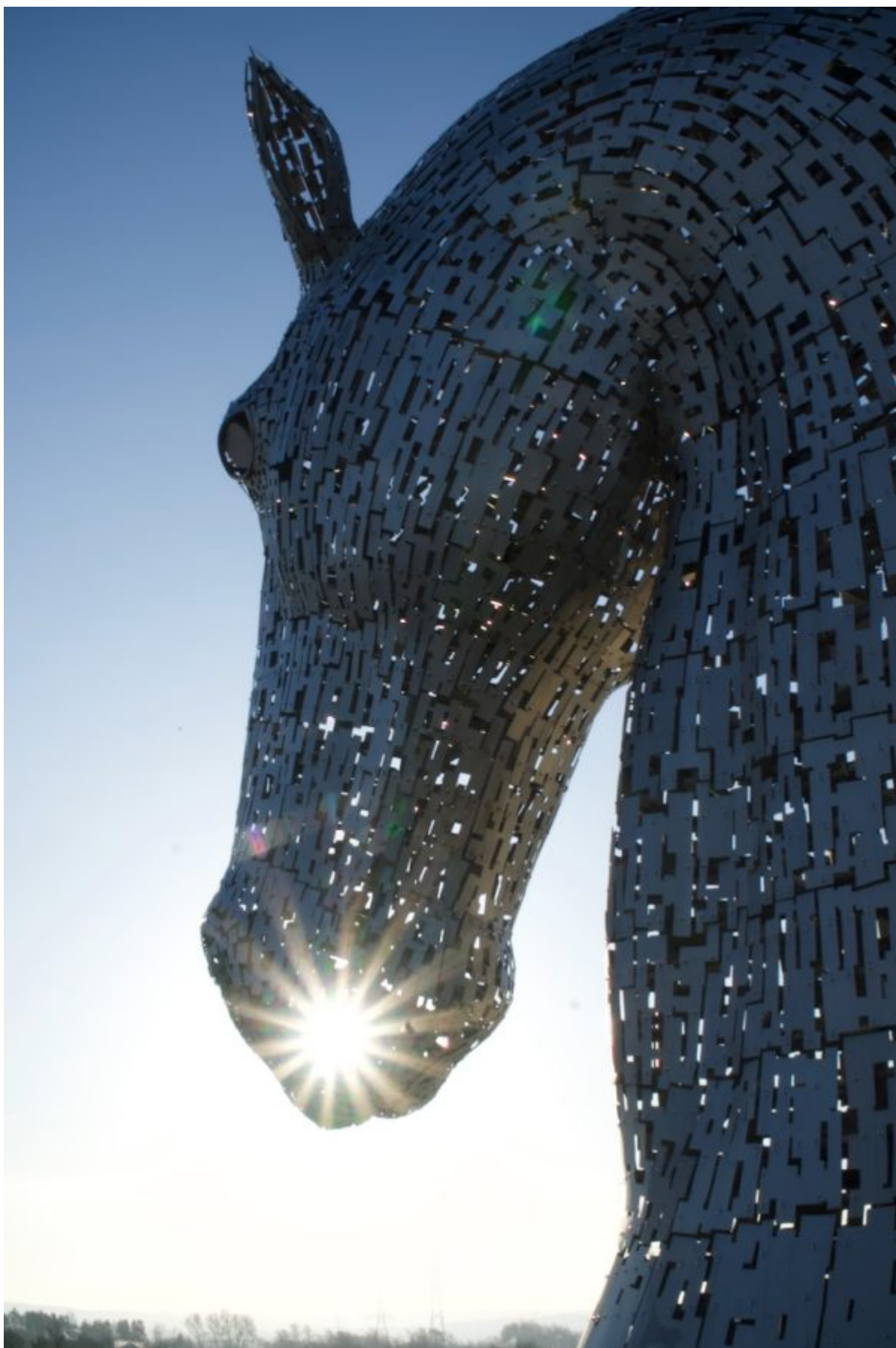
Storm Babet is deluging the North East of Scotland, as I write. People have been advised not to travel. In Brechin, 300 residents have been told to leave their homes. A woman has been washed away in the flooded River Esk. A red-alert for flood-warnings has been issued for Angus and the south of Aberdeenshire. And the rest of the country can expect heavy rain over the next few days. We are in that much-declared "climate emergency."



The way ahead. The Union Canal, Edinburgh to Falkirk. Meanwhile, Ukraine battles against Putin's invasion and the Middle East is at war. Our own first minister Humza Yousaf has family members trapped in Gaza and in his first speech as party leader to the SNP conference in Aberdeen he made a heartfelt plea for a ceasefire by all sides and a safe route for people to leave Gaza and humanitarian aid to enter. He went on to promise a welcome for Palestinian refugees in Scotland.

All of this is wishful thinking and none of it is straightforward, just like the SNP's new route to independence agreed at the conference. Instead of using next year's Westminster election as a "de facto referendum", counting the votes for the SNP and the Greens as votes for independence, the election will be used as a lever to persuade the UK government to allow a real referendum. If the SNP wins a majority of the 59 seats, it will demand a referendum. It's

likely to be refused, unless the SNP hold the balance of power. Then anything could happen.





The Kelpies form a gateway at the eastern entrance to the Forth and Clyde canal, and the canal extension built as part of The Helix land transformation project. PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter

But it's a considerable retreat for the SNP. It recognises that the population is still divided 50/50 on the issue of the Union and the independence campaign still has a long way to go. But then the Union of 1707 was not created in a day, it took 104 years. The Union Canal, named in celebration of it, took five years to build. It opened in 1822, Thomas Telford cleverly following the 73m contour for 31 miles from Edinburgh to Falkirk where the canal connects with the Forth-Clyde canal. Its purpose was to carry coal and quarry-stone into Edinburgh but after just 20 years it was over-taken by the railways. Canal building, like Union building, is not straightforward.

Having taken this pragmatic decision on independence, it was surprising that Humaz Yousaf went on to make a series of populist announcements. Suddenly another £300 million has been found to tackle NHS waiting lists, and another £100 million for the arts, this at a time when he is telling local councils there is no more money to meet pay demands. And he went on to take more money out of local council budgets by freezing council tax for the next year. That in itself will need up to £400 million to compensate councils for the loss of income. It also deprives them of the right to increase council tax to protect local services.

If he were looking for a pain-free way of raising tax, council tax increases are the easy answer. Scottish local taxes are lower than in England, having fallen behind by £900 million in the 12 year council tax freeze previously imposed by the SNP, to the great detriment of local services. It's also a useful wealth tax since it falls on those most able to pay. Mr Yousaf could have announced a national revaluation of property, last done in 1991, which would mean people would be paying tax in proportion to the value of their homes, an idea

backed this week by the Poverty and Inequality Commission.

Because of this tax austerity we are getting quite used to our schools being closed. This week it's been the half-term holiday but it was a half term marked by three days of strike action in most schools by auxiliary workers – janitors, cleaners, dinner ladies and class-room assistants. The sporadic strikes look set to continue after members of Unison voted overwhelmingly against the current pay offer of 5 per cent. Two other unions will be announcing results of their ballots on Tuesday.

It wasn't as straightforward as we thought, but Scotland's men's football team have qualified for the European finals in Germany next year. All appeared well in the earlier stages, with five wins to our credit. However at an away match in Seville, we lost to Spain 2-0, despite beating them at Hampden earlier in the competition. But then, last weekend, without kicking a ball, Scotland squeezed into the finals, coming second in our group, thanks to those earlier points and, ironically, thanks to the Spaniards who beat Norway in Oslo 1-0, denying the Norwegians the chance to catch up.

Nothing is easy. God may be in his heaven but all is not right with the world.



First Minister Humza Yousaf PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter