

Letter from Scotland

The cold clear nights have given us spectacular displays of the Aurora Borealis, the Northern Lights, or at least those of us lucky enough to see them. The photographs show walls of green and white light flickering across the sky as the solar wind disturbs our protective magnetic field and sets the atoms in our atmosphere ablaze.

Long before photographs, the Aurora were drawn on the cave walls of early man and on the parchments of ancient China. The Roman goddess of the sun gave them their name. In Celtic history they were known as the Merry Dancers, Na Fir Chlis, a macabre battle between noble warriors and dark angels, their blood dripping to earth in the “bloodstones” of the Hebrides.



Fireworks of the gods. The Northern Lights. Photo by Chris Combe, Fife on [Flickr](#)

In this country we can count ourselves lucky, the Northern Lights are just that, lights, not the rockets, bombs and drones that light up the sky over Gaza or the Ukraine. This being Remembrance weekend, we give thanks that we are at peace.

Personally, I don't see why quiet ceremonies at cenotaphs or war memorials can't be accompanied by peace marches on the other side of town. They are intended to give real effect to our pledge to end all wars. But is a large crowd waving Palestinian flags and calling for a ceasefire, a peace march or a protest against the actions of one side, Israel? I'd say it can be both. But the issue will be widely debated this weekend, just as it was last weekend when there were such marches in Glasgow and Edinburgh.



Niddrie 5 November 2023

On a less existential level, the people of my neighbouring estate, Niddrie in Edinburgh, saw their own version of the Northern Lights on Bonfire Night. As unofficial firework displays took place, a crowd of 50 youths started throwing fireworks, petrol bombs and bricks at the police. Four officers were injured. The police say adults too had a hand in the troubles, providing youths with fireworks and Molotov cocktails. This was the worst incident but there was firework trouble too in Dundee, Glasgow, Kilmarnock and parts of West Lothian when youths attacked police and fire officers.

It's all led to discussion about the sale of fireworks, the cut-backs to police and fire services, the collapse of community policing and the underlying causes of youth violence against authority.

As is all too common these days, the problems are all piled on the First Minister's desk. Humza Yousaf has only just got his wife's parents out of Gaza and is frantically trying to hold the SNP together in the face of dwindling support in the opinion polls. He is also facing pettifogging criticism from opposition parties over What'sApp submissions to the Covid

inquiries. His instinct, in all of this, seems to be to resort to “reviewing the situation”.



First Minister, Humza Yousaf, addressing the SCVO conference at EICC on 8 November 2023 PHOTO ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter
This week we had two more examples, a postponement of the education reforms and the climate change plan. The Education Secretary, Jenny Gilruth, gave as the reasons for shelving the plan to change the exam system, the fact that schools are struggling against classroom violence and poor attendance. The Net Zero Secretary, Mairi McAllan, said the delay to the climate change plan was due to “reneging” by the UK government on the timetable for phasing out fossil fuel cars and replacing gas boilers.

Well if climate change does not end intelligent life on Earth, AI surely will. I was shocked to hear one of my colleagues remark that she had found Artificial Intelligence useful in summarising a well-known institution’s “aims and objectives” document. I’ve heard that AI can now write TV sit-coms or political speeches. And I suppose it could turn its hand to

Kings' Speeches, such as the one we heard this week at Westminster outlining the windfall we are all to get every year from selling oil-drilling licences in the North Sea.

But don't worry, there is an Edinburgh company using AI to save the planet. "Space Intelligence" is using artificial intelligence to analyse satellite images of the world's forests. It's not just to count trees but to figure out ways of conserving them and protecting the species that live in them.

So there may be intelligent life in space after all. Perhaps it's trying to contact us through the Aurora we've been enjoying this week.