

Letter from Scotland

Edinburgh is coming late to the Diwali party this year. But this weekend there will be the traditional parade through the city centre with displays of dancing, exotic food and fireworks. It's not unlike the Celtic Samhuinn Festival at the foot of Arthur's Seat at the end of October. Both mark the transition from the light of summer to the dark of winter.

The public celebration of the Hindu and Sikh festival is a sign of growing multiculturalism in Scotland. But we have come late to the party. This is only the eighth year of the Diwali parade in Edinburgh. To be fair, Hindu and Sikhs only make up a tiny proportion of our population, 25,000 at the last count or 0.5 per cent.



Dance Ihayami
Anjali Nair
Athena Tilak
Lakshmi Akula
Lera Theresa Bineesh

Picture Alan Simpson

Indeed, our ethnic mix is not particularly varied, though it is growing. Figures from the latest census in 2022 are not yet broken down into ethnic groups, but in 2011, 84 percent of the Scottish population classed themselves as white/British or Scottish. Around 2.7 per cent said they were of Asian origin and 0.7 per cent said their families were originally from Africa or the Caribbean. (The rest chose not to answer the question). The figures for England and Wales show more of a mix, with 9 per cent classing themselves as Asian.

Whether Britain or Scotland have yet achieved “multiculturalism” is a moot point. There are still many ghettos, either geographical or cultural. But the issue of immigration is less fraught in Scotland than it is in England, as we saw in the Brexit referendum. Indeed the Scottish government line, Labour and SNP, has always been that we need more immigrants. Our population is in long term decline and is aging fast. There are shortages of workers in agriculture, health and care services and in hotels and restaurants.

Scots themselves have been famous for migration over the centuries. Estimates of people in other countries claiming Scots decent range from 30 million to 100 million. For example in the summer of 1770, 54 vessels left the Highlands for America, carrying 1,200 emigrants. It would thus be slightly disingenuous for us to complain about “small boats” carrying migrants to our shores.

It’s curiously ironic that Rishi Sunak and our first minister Humza Yousaf take such opposite views of the immigration

issue. Both are sons of immigrants, one from India and the other from Pakistan. Both preside over countries that are slowly evolving into mixed race societies. In the last hundred years, Scotland has had waves of incomers from Ireland, Italy, Pakistan, India, Poland, and more recently from the rest of Eastern Europe and South East Asia. All of whom are economic migrants, and we must expect more of them as the Arab and African worlds heat up.

It's altogether fitting and proper that we have a cap each year on how many economic migrants we can absorb in our small country. But that is quite different from our obligation to give asylum to refugees who are fleeing war or persecution. For them there should be an application process at their nearest British embassy. And the total number of refugees should then be subtracted from the cap on economic migrants.

But instead we have had the chaos of Suella Braverman's Home Office. Until Monday, when she was unceremoniously dismissed. In the subsequent cabinet reshuffle David Cameron, son of an Aberdeenshire stockbroker, was brought in as foreign secretary to steady Mr Sunak's small boat. I'm not sure it's going to end well, since Mr Cameron was the man who rocked the boat with two divisive referendums and a disastrous austerity programme of government cuts.

I wonder how he will handle Mr Sunak's policy for "stopping the boats" – drawing up a new treaty with Rwanda to get round this week's Supreme Court ruling that Rwanda is not a safe country for refugees. Mr Yousaf has branded the whole Rwanda project as "morally repugnant."

So there are plenty of issues for Humza Yousaf to disagree on with Westminster. Another this week, was the question of a ceasefire in Gaza. Mr Yousaf has called for a ceasefire ever since his wife's parents were trapped by the fighting in Gaza. The SNP's motion at Westminster, calling for an immediate ceasefire, attracted 125 votes and split the Labour Party.

There's likely to be a vote in the Scottish parliament next week on a ceasefire, when everyone is watching to see which way the Scottish Labour Party leader Anas Sarwar will vote.

Incidentally, he is another son of an immigrant, Mohammad Sarwar, who was born in the Punjab, made his fortune in Glasgow and became a Labour MP.

And so the tapestry of Scottish history emerges from the loom. Let's hope it continues to be a tartan of interwoven colours and not a chaotic quilt of disjointed squares, each ethnic group hemmed in by its own culture.