

# Letter from Scotland

**On St Andrew's Day, the nation said farewell to our two ambassadors from China.**

Giant pandas, Tian Tian and Yang Guang, were brought to Edinburgh Zoo in 2011 in what the First Minister at the time, Alex Salmond, liked to regard as a major diplomatic coup. Scotland was now seen by China as an independent country, he boasted, and he liked to share the thought that there were more pandas in Scotland than there were Labour MPs.

Cartoonists even depicted Mr Salmond as a panda, complete with black eye-patches.

The zoo itself has made a fortune out of its two pandas, even though the deal involved paying China £790,000 a year for the loan. Visitor numbers soared and interest was always sustained by the prospect of a panda cub. That never happened and now the aging couple are on their way home to the bamboo groves of the Chinese mountains. It's heartening to know, though, that this icon of conservation, is growing in numbers again and there are now around 2,000 giant pandas world-wide, most of them waiting in China for their next ambassadorial mission.



25/11/2023

Picture Alan Simpson

Yang Guang

The pandas' diplomatic mission is over.





25/11/2023 Picture Alan Simpson Tia Tian during the last weekend to see Pandas in their inside enclosure before they return to China.

They might be well deployed at the Cop-28 UN Climate Change Conference in Dubai, along with King Charles, Lord Cameron and a legion of world leaders , including our own First Minister Humza Yousaf. One of the things he's been calling for is compensation payments for poor countries hit by the consequences of fossil burning by rich countries. Graciously, that was agreed on the first day.

It seems though that oil producing countries, like Dubai and the UK, will pay any price for the privilege of burning more oil and gas – compensation payments, carbon-capture costs, “transition” schemes, new timetables. Mr Yousaf's own Green minister Patrick Harvie announced this week that the start date for phasing out gas home-boilers is to be postponed from 2025 to 2028.

This week Scotland said farewell to two of our well-known politicians, known for their integrity and quiet manner. Both were Edinburgh MPs. I have Alistair Darling's book on my shelf, recounting his thousand days as Chancellor of the Exchequer. His cool head during the banking crisis of 2008 helped save the crisis turning into a financial disaster.



Alistair Darling – Alan Simpson

I had the privilege of knowing Alistair at Aberdeen University 50 years ago. I came across him several times in my days as a radio reporter, watching him progress from a young radical to a well-dressed government minister. What didn't change was his earnest honesty and his subdued sense of humour. He obviously didn't like the divisive independence referendum campaign of 2014 but was persuaded to lead the Better Together movement because he was someone all parties could agree to. In retirement, he served quietly in the House of Lords and on several company boards. I last met him in the summer, at an informal university re-union, where he gave no hint he was ill. And now he is gone, aged 70.





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The other quiet man was James Douglas- Hamilton, Conservative MP and later MSP, the son of the 14<sup>th</sup> Duke of Hamilton. He

renounced his title of Earl of Selkirk to take his seat in the House of Commons and The Scottish Parliament, but later reclaimed it when he joined the House of Lords. He began life as a lawyer and then served as a Scottish minister in the Thatcher and Major governments. He was one of those gentle, unknowing aristocrats, always courteous and hesitant.

One famous anecdote which did the rounds in the newsroom was that "Lord James" would hold the door of his official car open for any lady driver before taking his seat in the back.

Both men are now freed from the burden of our continuing political problems.

Here is this week's list. The NHS, we are told by the chair of British Medical Association, will not survive to its hundredth year in 2048. The new Chief Constable says she needs £128million a year more to avoid further cuts in service and officer numbers. Classroom violence is on the rise, even in primary schools. And the Finance Secretary Shona Robison says her budget, to be announced later this month, will inevitably mean cuts in public sector jobs.

Welcome to our winter wonderland. It's been a cold, wet and dark week. The Pentland hills, on my horizon, are powdered in snow. I wonder if it's time to hibernate like a weary bear...a panda bear. But apparently, giant pandas don't hibernate, they just take a flight home to China.