

Letter from Scotland

It's been a frightening year, this 2023, with wars abroad, uncertainty at home and unusual forces of nature bringing drought and rain and gathering storms.

But watching the crowds milling around the centre of Edinburgh –or any other Scottish town – you would think there is nothing amiss. It's all Christmas jollity and high spirits and there's no going quietly into that good night. In Edinburgh the tourists and multi-lingual Hogmanay revellers force us to keep our spirits bright.



The view from the burrow. Princes Street Gardens, Edinburgh. And there is a lot to celebrate. We've recovered from the worst of the Covid pandemic, even though there appears to be a new wave sweeping the country at the moment. We're supposed to be learning the lessons of the first more alarming waves in the two inquiries now under way in London and Edinburgh.

We've taken a cut in our standard of living, it's true, but we are still one of the richest countries in world. Our banks, businesses, schools, hospitals, local councils are still operating, just. The storms have not been bad, by international standards, and we've even had the odd success in the arts and sport.



The UK Government has just awarded £2 million to the renovation of the King's Theatre

So we look out upon the world from a quiet and very fortunate backwater. The horrors of the wars in the Ukraine and Gaza are appalling but they are distant images, television events. Only occasionally do we get involved, when relatives tell their family stories, or we donate to the aid agencies or we go on marches calling for ceasefires.

This year has heightened my own fears about the safety of the world. We have dictators ruling Russia and China, mad regimes in Iran, Afghanistan, North Korea. Major democracies like India and the United States are deeply divided. Then there is climate change and biological collapse and instability in financial markets and fragility in our communication systems.

The challenges in the year ahead are massive. Even here in our backwater, we have problems to solve. A quarter of our population are living in poverty which explains Scotland's poor record on health, our sliding standards in schools and our general untidiness.



The Scottish Government has been trying to do something about it. The Finance Secretary Shona Robison used her Budget speech to announce an increase in income tax for high-earners to pay for public services. But this only goes half way to offset what she says is an “austerity” block grant from London. She warned there will still have to be job cuts in many public services and she is only able to offer local councils partial compensation if they agree to freeze their council tax.

Sometime in 2024, there will be a UK General Election which the Labour Party is expected to win. But even the Labour Party doesn't seem to know how much change that will bring.

The one big political event of this year in Scotland has been the shattering of the SNP's Braveheart image. It all started on 15 February with the sudden resignation of Nicola Sturgeon after eight years as first minister. Her successor Humza Yousaf only narrowly won the party's internal election and has since rowed back on a whole raft of policies – the route to independence, climate change targets, oil developments, no-

fishing zones, bottle recycling, a national care service, gender recognition, school curriculum reforms. He's waiting to see how the wind blows.



First Minister Humza Yousaf returns to Bute House after being sworn in at the Court of Session ©2023 The Edinburgh Reporter
The wind in the opinion polls is similarly undecided. Sometimes the SNP is in the lead, sometimes Labour, and meanwhile support for independence stays stuck at around 48 per cent.

Altogether, I sense we are living in more than usually troubled times. No one quite knows who is in charge – is it the politicians, or the media or the social media or the algorithms of artificial intelligence? I notice too that the default position for many people is to describe, or criticise, the world around them but not to suggest solutions. Am I the only one who finds this frustrating? I have lots of favourite solutions. May I take the liberty of New Year to alarm you with some of them?

For instance, I would raise council tax to pay for better local services. I would levy a retirement tax to pay for social care. I would limit what the NHS can offer. On climate change I would make the polluter pay and ban the use of plastic packaging. On the war in Ukraine I would like to see the West stand up to Putin more, in the expectation that his regime will fall. And in the Middle East, I would abandon the two state solution and urge Israelis and Palestinians to share the small piece of land they both call home.

They did so at Christmas all those years ago.

My wish for 2024 is that more people will “put the world to rights” and talk about solutions, however idealistic.



Towerbank Primary School – Ukraine Walk, Portobello, Edinburgh, 22nd March 2022

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