

Letter from Scotland

As we headed into a new year and began to consider our destiny, and that of our country and our planet, what should come back to haunt us but the Stone of Destiny.

A fragment of this lump of sandstone, on which the kings and queens of Scotland and then Britain were crowned, has been discovered in a cupboard at SNP headquarters in Edinburgh. According to government papers, which also came to light this week, the former first minister Alex Salmond was given this holy relic in 2008 by the son of one of the group of nationalists who "stole" the Stone from Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day 1950. It was a publicity stunt which went hilariously wrong at every turn.



The many stones of destiny.

Poor Alex Salmond was accused of losing a part of the very touchstone of independence. But happily it turns out that he'd given it to SNP headquarters for safe keeping and everyone forgot about it. Until this week and all the Stone's symbolism has again lit the sky like New Year fireworks.

The crumbling stone has been trundled from Scotland to England and back many times. King Edward stole it from Scone near Perth in 1296 and took it to Westminster as a trophy of his conquest. It remained there till the SNP raiders stole it back, briefly, in 1950. Then in 1996, the Conservatives returned it to Scotland in an attempt to head off Devolution. Last year King Charles borrowed it because he needed something to sit on at his coronation at Westminster. It's now back in Edinburgh but will soon go to a new museum in Perth where it was originally quarried.

The Scots are not the only people to make a fuss over a piece

of stone. It's a universal symbol of strength and magical powers. Think of Harry Potter's Philosopher's Stone, or Stonehenge or the Callanish stones, or the Blarney Stone or a tomb stone. Stones encourage us to think about our destiny.

And so to our future in 2024. Thankfully, we don't have wars or starvation to face like other lands. Climate change has barely touched us so far – even though last year was the hottest year on record. We do have a general election looming and the party leaders have spent the week making their case and trying to look responsible.

They joined forces to commiserate with the 900 postmasters, a hundred of them in Scotland, who've had their lives ruined over the last 20 years in the Horizon computer scandal. Suddenly it was necessary for Scotland's first minister Humza Yousaf to co-operate with the UK government in paying compensation and devising a legal route in both English and Scots Law to exonerate those who were wrongfully accused of swindling the Post Office. It says something sad about our political and legal system that it took a TV drama to highlight the injustice.

Mr Yousaf also quickly fell into line with the UK government in promising to clamp down on the ownership of American XL Bully dogs after fears that there would packs of dogs dumped across the border. These big nasty-looking dogs, with an appropriately frightening name, will have to have a special licence and be kept on the lead in public. Why anyone who is not patrolling a prison fence would want to own one I don't understand.

We will now watch as the three main parties, the SNP, Labour and the Conservatives make an effort to appear as responsible dog owners and only gently try to appeal to each other's supporters to lend them their vote. Radical differences will be toned down, which is a worry because the issues we face are so big they need radical solutions.

I'm thinking of the NHS, the education system and local council services which all need to be cut back or properly funded with tax rises. And then there is the great "transition" out of fossil fuels.

These are the hard rock issues which no magic Stone of Destiny can solve. So the best place for that piece of soft sandstone is in the museum in Perth where we can all forget about it.

