

# Letter from Scotland

One of the great adventures of my teenage years was to cycle solo from my home in Aberdeen to the west coast Island of Iona. It took a week, there and back, camping along the way in a little green tent I'd made for the expedition. Why Iona? I now wonder. Was it my Irish heritage? Is Iona Scotland's spiritual home?

The stepping stone of Iona, linking Ireland and Scotland, has been much on my mind this week as we watch the new political settlement in Northern Ireland unfolding.



Iona Abbey. Photo by Ian Capper.

Certainly, Iona plays an important part in Scotland's history. It's where St Columba landed from Ireland in 563 to teach the new religion of Christianity to the heathen Picts and Scots. His early priory became a Benedictine Abbey in the Middle Ages but fell into ruin at the Reformation. It was rebuilt in the 1930s by unemployed workers from Glasgow led by the Rev George MacLeod. The Iona Community he founded is still alive today, campaigning for political peace and religious reconciliation.

Coming from Ireland myself as a boy, the Scots-Irish connection has been part of my life. Many Protestant families, like mine, emigrated to Northern Ireland from lowland Scotland in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries as part of the Protestant "plantation". Then in the centuries since, many Catholic families have come from Ireland to find work in Scotland. These mass movements still have their reverberations today, in separate schools, football allegiances and class divides.

It's heartening then, for all Scots, to see progress this week towards reconciliation in Northern Ireland after the turmoil caused by Brexit. The re-establishment of the Assembly puts the Province back in the jigsaw of the Four Nations that make up the United Kingdom. It also means that comparisons can be made between them. For instance: if Northern Ireland can have special treatment from the European Union over the so-called "green lane" customs checks, why can't Scotland?

Of course, the whole sad saga of Ireland would never have happened if Gladstone's dream of "Home Rule All Round" had not been interrupted by the First World War. I still have a dream of a Federal Britain – of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland (North and South). And all of us in the European Union.

The other big story of this week has been the UK Covid Inquiry which has been in Edinburgh examining how Scotland, as a devolved nation, handled the pandemic. Poor Nicola Sturgeon came close to tears explaining how she, as first minister at the time, did her very best to preserve life, and keep society running, through those panic-ridden years.

In a dark suit, behind a court room desk, she was subjected to five hours of questioning. Did she delete her WhatsApp messages? Did she take decisions without proper cabinet approval? Did she try to politicise the pandemic to make points about Scottish independence? Did she get anything wrong?

Regrets, she had a few: the deaths of those who succumbed to the virus, of course, but also not introducing a lockdown sooner. She tried to work with the somewhat dysfunctional UK government led by that "clown" Boris Johnson. The independence campaign was never in her mind. And yes, she did delete her WhatsApp messages but all decisions were officially recorded and always approved by the cabinet.

Other ministers and medical officials were questioned by Lady Hallett's Scottish lawyers and she will now take her inquiry to Wales and Northern Ireland to see how the pandemic was dealt with there. The Covid years brought us as close to a war-time atmosphere as Britain has experienced since 1945. Government diktats and huge expenditure (£370billion) were accepted without much question. It now seems, however, that having won the war, we want to rake over the ashes and blame someone for the inevitable mistakes.

It won't bring anyone's loved-ones back and I think we're in danger of forgetting it was the virus which killed people, not the politicians who are taking the blame. They were doing their best and we don't know how many lives they saved, probably millions because of the vaccine roll-out.

History is easy, because it's all done in retrospect. I don't suppose Columba, for all his saintly powers, did everything perfectly. And I don't suppose he imagined that Scotland would become an uneasy part of such a complicated United Kingdom.



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