

# Letter from Scotland

**It's been a week of wind and rain and, occasionally, snow, as the weather swings erratically from unusually mild to freezing cold, day by day.**

The storms are getting stronger. We are on to our ninth this winter already. We've just recovered from Storm Isha and Jocelyn which brought winds of 70-80mph (140mph on top of Cairngorm). Thousands of trees were brought down, electricity cables were broken, railway lines were closed and roads blocked. Last year was even worse when Storm Arwin, Corrie and Malik brought down millions of pine trees all along the east coast.

The raging storms throw three particularly Scottish issues together, "trees, wind and energy". Ideally, we should be harnessing the energy in the wind and using the trees to control climate change and temper the storms. But it's not proving easy.



## Wind power

The Scottish Government is cutting the tree planting programme in its current budget by 41 per cent (from £77 million to £45 million), meaning we won't be planting the 18,000 hectares of new woodland each year as planned but only 9,000. And this follows several years of missed targets in the overall plan to increase Scotland's tree cover from 19 per cent of the land area to 25 percent. Even that is a long way behind the European average of 46 per cent – though it is well ahead of England (10 per cent) and Wales (15 per cent).

The owner of a tree nursery in Morayshire made the news headlines last week when he said he would have to burn 10 million seedlings which he had been preparing for tree-growing market this year. The bonfire is a strange way of getting to our net zero carbon Valhalla. The Scottish Government blames the funding cut on "austerity" from Westminster.

What about harnessing the gods of the wind? Well, Scotland has

doubled its renewable electricity generation over the last decade, largely by building wind farms on-shore. We're now seeing them on the horizon off-shore, where the biggest is the Seagreen field off the coast of Angus with 114 turbines. Another large field is almost complete off the Firth of Forth, with the charmingly Gaelic name of Neart na Gaoith (the strength of the wind).

The trouble with the wind gods is that they do not always blow, in fact most turbines only produce significant power a third of the time. And if all the capacity predicted for off-shore wind (25GW) is built, Scotland will still only produce half its energy requirements from renewables.

So the search for power goes on. It was ever so. The ancient Caledonian forest – 15,000 sq km of it – was cleared for timber and for charcoal, leaving Scotland with only five per cent tree cover by the end of the First World War. The brave but misguided Forestry Commissioners planted swathes of densely packed pine woods to meet the need for timber. Only later did they realise that woodlands are needed for other things, notably the ability to absorb carbon and to save the bio-sphere.

Alex Salmond, the first SNP first minister, used to remark, poetically, that Scotland was thrice blessed with abundant energy – coalfields in the Lowlands, oil and gas in the North Sea and wind and hydro-power in the Highlands. He came up with an exciting figure of Scotland having 25 per cent of the wind and all tidal power available in Europe. Unfortunately, the SNP hung on to the figure too long and it had to be corrected last year to just five per cent.

So there is still a large gap in our supply of energy which is currently being filled by oil and gas. The SNP has set its face against the nuclear option. The only nuclear power station remaining in Scotland, Torness on the East Lothian coast, is due to close in 2028. That leaves a lot to be done

on electrification, home insulation, energy storage and carbon capture if we are to reach our world-beating target of net zero by 2045.

Carbon capture brings us back to trees. Can we plant enough trees to assuage the gods of the wind and prevent the planet over-heating? We will have to wait anxiously till 2045 to find out. But on present progress, we are at the mercy of the gods.