

Letter from Scotland

“It’s been a quiet week in Lake Wobegon.” It was always the first line in the American humourist Garrison Keillor’s radio show, broadcast from the prairies of Minnesota in the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

And it’s my headline this week. We’ve been waiting for things to happen.

We’re waiting for spring to start properly, on the equinox (20th). And we’re waiting for a break in the dreary weather – we’re still getting mist on the coasts and snow on the hills. We’re waiting to see if Scotland can beat Ireland in the men’s rugby Six Nations Championship on Saturday and the women’s rugby against Wales the weekend after that.



Lichen woods, waiting for spring.

Scotland's 2.5m Christians are waiting for Easter. 76,000 Muslims are already marking Ramadan. 6,000 Jews are waiting for the festival of Purim. And 1.9m non-religious Scots are waiting for.....well, anything. I think it was G K Chesterton who said: "People who don't believe in God will believe anything."

I mention this religious tartan warp and weft because, although modern Scotland appears to be an equal and tolerant society on the surface, there are ripples of culture wars beneath. Islamophobia, antisemitism, sectarianism, racism, xenophobia, misogyny, gender politics, wokeism.... extremism of one sort or another are all in the air, spilling out from our so-called "smart" phones.

In England, it seems such inner turmoil is even nearer the surface. It's become so bad that the prime minister Rishi Sunak issued a special plea for tolerance, in an emergency

statement from the steps of 10 Downing Street in the wake of the Rochdale by-election. Some said, by doing so, he was fanning the flames of extremism by over-reacting to it.

Then on Thursday, the UK communities minister Michael Gove, came up with a new definition of "extremism". Any group that "negates the rights of others ...or undermines the UK system of liberal parliamentary democracy" will be excommunicated, no longer allowed to have any support from the government.

The new policy will not apply in Scotland but from 1 April a new Hate Crime Act comes into force which extends the offence of stirring up racism to other "protected characteristics" including: religion, disability, age and sexual orientation. The police are already worried about how they are going to interpret and enforce this. It's all a sign of the brittle times we live in, a more divided society and a more divided world.

A sharp example of the underclass in Scotland is our 60,000 drug addicts. There was little surprise that the number of drug deaths last year rose again to 1,197, mostly middle-aged men, the highest rate per head in Europe. There were questions in parliament of course, but all the first minister Humza Yousaf could say was that the government is building more residential treatment centres.

Cuts to local council services are not helping and householders have been waiting to hear which services they are about to lose as a result of the SNP government's council tax freeze. At first, councils were threatening to revolt against the idea but, in the end, all but two of the 32 councils have accepted the government's "bribe" of £210 million, which is about a third of what they say is needed to keep services as they are now.

It means the average council tax bill in Scotland will be £1,400 this year, compared to £2,160 in England. Is this wise

? Councils will be dipping into their reserves and skimping on services like schools, nursing care, waste collection, libraries, sports centres and, what a lot of people complain about most, potholes in the roads.

One lady who was not waiting for spring to arrive is Anna Wells. The 34 year old mountain instructor from Inverness has just become the first woman to complete a round of the 282 Munros in winter. "Winter" being from the shortest day 22nd December to the equinox on 20th March. Only three people have done it before. The first was Martin Moran in 1985 who did it in 83 days. Ms Wells did it in the same time, despite losing four days through illness. She faced some tough weather – deep snow and strong winds. On her last Munro, Cairn Gorm, on Wednesday, the wind speed on the top reached 87mph.

This is the kind of thing that happens on a quiet day in our Wobegon.