

Letter from Scotland

Scotland's commitment to Net Zero Carbon is as uncertain as the weather. This week The Scottish Government has had to admit defeat in trying to meet its target of 75 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030. It's a huge disappointment for a country which boasts that it has "the most stretching climate change-targets in the world."

In fact we've missed the annual target in eight out of the last 12 years and the Independent Climate Change Committee says there is no chance of us meeting the 2030 target. So on Thursday afternoon, the government scrapped the target, just like that. But don't worry, Màiri McAllan, the Climate Secretary, told parliament the longer term target of net zero by 2045 remains, and that's still five years ahead of almost every other country in the world. It's just that it will be achieved with less troublesome targets.



Dark skies. A changeable day in the Cairngorms.

Instead we'll be using the English and Welsh model of "carbon budgeting" which has the advantage of being spread over five years. In fact England has been making more progress in cutting emissions than Scotland in the last few years and this is despite the Westminster government postponing some of its climate commitments, like the switch to electric cars.

It's all a bit unreal watching the politicians moving the goalposts on a playing field that is flooding as quickly as Dens Park in Dundee. They appear to have forgotten that they declared a "climate emergency" five years ago in response to the school children's Friday strikes and a series of huge public demonstrations. Since then the world has had its warmest years since records began and we've been inundated by storms, floods, droughts and forest fires.

This winter, we had no fewer than 11 named storms, bringing havoc to our transport and farming industries and serious

flooding to the poor people of Brechin.

The Green Party co-leader Patrick Harvie was forced to admit that the 2030 target had to be dropped but said it should be a “turning point” in the fight against climate change. Ms McAllan tried to make that turn, announcing a new climate change plan (four months late), which includes the aforementioned carbon budgeting, an integrated ticketing system to encourage the use of buses and trains, 24,000 more charging points for electric cars, and a carbon tax on land estates.

The trouble is that the easy part of the transition to low-carbon has been made. Ending the coal and steel industries has cut carbon emissions by half since 1990. Tackling transport, home heating and agriculture is going to be tough and unpopular. The basic solution, in my view, is to stop subsidising energy costs. But tough measures are not something politicians are good at, though in that other “emergency” Covid, they persuaded the public of the need to make great sacrifices.

We will now find out if it’s better to have targets and fall short in meeting them or to have no targets at all.

Another policy which The Scottish Government has been pioneering is a minimum price per unit for alcoholic drinks. This is to tackle our “binge drinking ”culture which has left us with the highest rate of liver failure in Europe (except for Hungary.) In 2018 we were the first country in the world to introduce a minimum price linked to the alcoholic content of a drink. Wales and England have followed Scotland’s lead and other counties have various versions of price controls or taxes.

It’s still not clear how effective the unit price policy is in limiting binge drinking. The licensed trade says it penalises all drinkers and not those buying the cheapest drinks and who

are the real binge drinkers. The Scottish Government says minimum price has saved around 150 deaths a year and 400 hospital admissions. But the death rate is still rising, perhaps for other reasons. Nonetheless, on Tuesday MSPs voted to increase the minimum price from 50p per unit to 65p, to keep pace with inflation. So, from September, a typical bottle of whisky will go up from £14 to £18, red wine from £5-£6 and larger from £1- £1.30.



Peter Murrell, Chief Executive, Scottish National Party appears before the Committee on the Scottish Government Handling of Harassment Complaints to give evidence on Complaints Handling. 08 December 2020. Pic Andrew Cowan/Scottish Parliament

It's not been a great week for the SNP and it ended with its former chief executive Peter Murrell, Nicola Sturgeon's husband, being charged with embezzling party funds. The police have perhaps finally ended their five year long investigation

into why £660,000 of donations wasn't spent on a second referendum campaign.

Nicola Sturgeon must be wondering how her world appears to be falling apart since she resigned as First Minister just over a year ago – her party, her climate ambitions, her social reforms, her campaign for independence. Maybe, like climate change, the short-term targets were too ambitious and we must await the long-term verdict of history, in 2045.