

Letter from Scotland

After weeks of discontent, the end of the SNP/Green coalition came suddenly. At an emergency meeting of the Scottish Cabinet, at 8.30 on Thursday morning, SNP ministers decided to end the “Bute House Agreement”, which began the coalition between the SNP’s 63 MSPs and the Greens’ 7 MSPs to give the government a majority in a finely balanced Scottish Parliament.

Now the First Minister Humza Yousaf faces a vote of no confidence next week which could lead to the collapse of the government and a Scottish general election. The strange irony is that the lady who holds the balance of power is Ash Regan, who stood against Mr Yousaf for the leadership of the SNP and who now belongs to Alex Salmond’s break-away Alba Party.



“Two roads diverged in a wood. I took the one less travelled by and that has made all the difference.” Robert Frost
Things can happen quickly in the magic world of politics. Humza Yousaf had been praising the Agreement as a fine example of progressive government until as recently as Tuesday. What brought matters to this “divergence” was last week’s abandonment of Scotland’s climate change targets for 2030 and, bizarrely on the same day, the decision to pause puberty blockers for all new NHS patients. The co-incidence beautifully captures the wild range of this story, it’s about the planet and about people.

Of course, the Greens were upset to see climate change targets missed and then ditched but it seems they were even more angry about the puberty blockers and a whole series of setbacks over their social agenda – gender reform, the Hate Crimes Act, trials without juries. But there was upset too in the SNP from members who thought the Greens were dragging the government

too much to the left. The Greens, they said, were too ambitious on climate change, too progressive on social reforms and generally too wild and zainy, hijacked by minority interests.

It's certainly true that the two Green ministers in the government have struggled to get their policies to work – plastic bottle re-cycling had to be abandoned, marine protection areas are on hold, as are home heating regulations. They were not consulted on the foolhardy council tax freeze. And they've watched The Scottish Government ducking and diving on oil and gas, and road building, saying the transition to a low carbon future has to be gradual.

We have yet to see what the bruising experience of coalition will mean for the future of the Green Party. The co-leaders Patrick Harvie and Lorna Slater have staked their reputation on the Bute House Agreement, reached in the aftermath of the 2021 Scottish election. Their decision to hold a special party conference on the Agreement next month has now been overtaken by events, and we don't know if they will remain as leaders.

What puzzles me is why parties enter into coalitions at all. I think they have more power as independent parties in parliament, voting for policies they like and voting against policies they don't like. I think too, it's better democracy if the largest party forms the government and then has to come to parliament to win support for its different policies one by one. Alex Salmond did it successfully in The Scottish Parliament between from 2007 to 2011.

The Greens say they have achieved a great deal by joining the government – free travel for young people, a ban on single-use plastic, improved re-cycling rates, securing more funds for nature conservation. But these are not major planet-saving policies and the SNP may well have thought of them for themselves. I think the mistake the Greens have made is to stray from the environmental agenda and try to include too

many other issues. They've become like a hen with too many chickens who have now come home to roost.

Floating over all of this week's manoeuvres and gunfire, is the issue of independence. The SNP and the Greens joined forces because they see independence as the road to a better future for Scotland and, in the Green's case, the Planet. But as they stand at this "divergence" in the road to independence, I think they should pause to consider whether either road will make all the difference and then to have no regrets about the road not taken.