

Letter from Scotland

It's been a topsy-turvy week for three of our national leaders. Humza stepped down, John stepped up and Kate stepped aside. The result is a new and much-chastened government.

Poor Humza Yousaf (39) had only been First Minister for a year, and, seeking to keep everyone happy, he u-turned so many times he ended up going round in circles. It's sad, because he is a lovely, calm, quietly-spoken man, Scotland's first Asian leader. He took over the SNP/Green government after the sudden, and quite unnecessary, resignation of Nicola Sturgeon.



The Tea Party for two gentlemen, a fiesty young woman and an environmental dormouse.

He made three big mistakes, in my view. One was to impose a council tax freeze on Scotland's 32 local councils, depriving them of much-needed funds and their democratic dignity. The second was to abandon Scotland's 2030 climate change targets. And the third was to double down on gender and hate crime laws. The first two annoyed the Greens. The third annoyed a large part of his own party. So he opened up an ill-tempered rift that led to the end of the coalition government last week. On Monday Mr Yousaf was forced to announce his resignation.



So who could put the delicate Humpty Dumpty government back together again ? All the king's men seemed to favour John Swinney (60), the wise man of the party. He's been in the SNP since he was 15 and in government for 16 years, serving in both Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon's cabinet. He was even leader of the party from 2000 to 2004, which now looks like a previous existence.

To pull the left and right of the party together, however, he needed the backing of Kate Forbes (34), a clever and articulate Highland accountant and former finance secretary, who, last year ran Humza Yousaf a close second in the leadership race. But there's unlikely to be a race this year. Just hours after John Swinney declared his intention to stand for election again, and called on Kate to join him in a government of all the talents, she agreed not to stand herself but to support Mr Swinney.

Both had hesitated for three days, saying they were balancing family commitments against political duties. John Swinney left the government last year, heading for retirement. Kate Forbes

has a young child. Whether Ms Forbes could have beaten “honest John” we shall never know.

The contest would, though, would have exposed the divisions that have been growing in the party for the last few years. There are different views on the road to independence, climate change, the future of oil and gas, marine protection zones, progressive taxation, local authority finance, and a range of “social” issues, such as gender identity, puberty blockers and hate crime.

There’s also the strange controversy over Kate Forbes’ religion – as if she is the only MSP to belong to a church. Her church, the Free Church of Scotland, does not believe in sex before marriage or gay marriage, or trans-gender rights. But then neither does the Roman Catholic Church or the Muslim religion and yet many MSPs are members of these churches, including Mr Yousaf himself who was forcing the social agenda through.

As for the Greens, they have branded Kate Forbes as anti-gay, and part of a “right wing faction” of the SNP who they vehemently oppose. Now that they are free of the coalition, their seven MSPs have the balance of power in The Scottish Parliament. They can block any policy they don’t agree with, like the retreat from climate change measures, or more money for road-building and they can insist on environmental measures being included in the budget before they will vote for it.

The wonder is that the SNP has stayed afloat for so long. They are, of course buoyed up by the dream of independence, which still commands support from half the population. But, like any other single issue party (including the Greens), it is hard to keep a tidy cupboard on other issues.

With the new Swinney/Forbes coalition, it looks like we are in for a more cautious Scottish government, waiting for the tide

to turn in its favour and dreading the sound of Labour's marching bands.

