

Letter from Scotland

After last week's political storms, we are now invited to go out on deck with our new captain at the helm and sail into calmer seas.

John Swinney has promised to be a First Minister who will unite his SNP colleagues, reach out to all parties in parliament, and steer clear of the rocks of division.

He has started well, bringing summer weather to most parts of Scotland this weekend. But beneath the surface, there's a whole ocean of restless sea life and many rocky problems. Let's name a few: the budget, largely dictated by the UK mothership; the collapsing public services and the deteriorating environment and rising poverty. Each opens up a barrel of squirming disagreements.



Sea of tranquility, Port Appin, Argyll.

So, after the theatrics of last week, it's time to get down to governing. Mr Swinney says his first priority is to tackle child poverty. This is an enormous challenge. 24 per cent of Scottish children, 240,000, are living in households with an income less than 60 percent of the average income (after housing costs.) The government's current target is to cut that by 10 per cent by 2030 and, so far, it's being missed, despite the extra Scottish Child Payment of £26.70 a week for each child. That in itself costs The Scottish government £474m a year.

But poverty is about so many other things. So is Mr Swinney promising to tackle those as well – unemployment, low wages, poor housing, bad health, depression, addiction, lethargy?

His second priority is “growing the economy”, the promise of right wing politicians everywhere, because it appears to offer

riches for all, without the awkward need for wealth redistribution. But economic growth is hard to achieve and it depends on so many things outside the power of governments. It's also a strange goal, because although it can be measured (0.1 per cent last year, according to KPMG) its value is uncertain. It remains to be seen if the Mr Swinney uses the wider definition his predecessor favoured, the "welfare economy" which hints at the quality of jobs and the sustainability of income.

His third priority is improving the NHS, schools and council services. Here he is constrained by the block grant Scotland gets from Westminster. For the last two decades it's been subject to the doctrine of "austerity" – keeping taxes and government spending low. The SNP have tried in a small way to increase top income taxes (by £1.5 billion) but then blown much of it on a council tax freeze for wealthy home owners. It will be interesting to see if Mr Swinney has the courage to end the freeze next year. It will also be interesting to see if he can reform the NHS and other public services, perhaps by devolving them to local authorities.

Then there is the "climate emergency" which the SNP has already demoted to a long term slight concern, having ditched their targets for 2030. There's every sign in Mr Swinney's peace plan that oil and gas will still be tolerated, road improvements will go ahead and there won't be too many more wind farms in sensitive political constituencies. The same will apply to the "nature emergency" with a retreat from tree-planting, marine protection areas and even another national park.

And where, might we ask, is "independence" in Mr Swinney's priorities? There is no longer minister for independence. That was one of the few changes in the Swinney cabinet. His new deputy Kate Forbes is a gradualist on independence and so, one senses, is John Swinney. It will be interesting to how much prominence they give independence in their first big

test, the UK general election later this year.

The current SNP position is that a simple majority of MPs at the general election would be enough to trigger (somehow) another referendum. That has been reaffirmed by Mr Swinney. But if an incoming Labour government at Westminster refuses to grant a referendum, I think he and his cabinet would simply use the rebuff to fuel a longer-term campaign to build support for independence until it reaches the magic figure of 60 per cent when a referendum cannot really be refused.

And so the hard grind of government begins again for Mr Swinney. I hope he finds time to take a holiday with his family this summer, perhaps taking a ferry over calm seas to the Western Isles – oh, but “the ferries” is another of his problems!



First Minister, John Swinney, with his wife Elizabeth Quigley and son Matthew outside the Court of Session 8 May 2024. PHOTO ©2024 The Edinburgh Reporter