

Letter from Scotland

Crossing the river from one era to another is unsettling. This week we entered the flowing waters of a general election campaign, always a time of uncertainty.

The damning conclusions of the Infected Blood Inquiry reminded us that our trusted institutions cannot always be relied upon. The census results revealed how fast things are changing. Scotland is now a “non-religious” country and Gaelic is a minority language in its homeland of the Western Isles. All this is in a precarious world, of wars, climate change and social media mayhem.

Rishi Sunak’s rain-soaked announcement of a general election on 4 July had a mixed reception in Scotland. The Labour Party could not hide its glee, since it believes it will storm back to its original place as the Strong Man of Scotland and win a majority of the 59 seats. The new SNP leader John Swinney was less enthusiastic, since the nationalists are struggling in the polls – though independence itself is not. As he launched the SNP campaign in Edinburgh on Thursday, he complained that Mr Sunak was “disrespectful” towards Scotland by calling an election in the first week of the Scottish school holidays.



Crossing the river. The old railway viaduct over the Tweed at Peebles.

The Scottish Conservatives are even less enthusiastic, since they are down at just 12 per cent support in the latest You Gov opinion poll, though they may hold on to the seven seats they have, because of local issues. The prime minister himself visited the Nigg wind turbine fabrication yard in the Highlands on Thursday afternoon to make an early start on the campaign.

However, Douglas Ross, the Leader of the Scottish Conservatives, chose to avoid any talk of the election when he got up to ask his questions at first minister's question time. He was encouraged in this strange behaviour by the presiding officer, Alison Johnstone, who ruled that The Scottish Parliament should not be used as a campaigning venue for a UK general election. It was a ridiculous ruling when most of the parliament's funding comes from Westminster.

So instead of discussing real big political issues, on the first day of an election campaign, we saw party leaders chase themselves run down a rabbit hole over an £11,000 phone bill.

(If you need to know – the former health secretary Michael Matheson was less than honest about the use of his parliamentary ipad. It was being used by his sons to watch football while on holiday in Morocco).

Not much wonder the general population have their doubts about our public institutions. The scandal of the week has been highlighted in the publication of the final report into the blood contamination tragedy in the 1970s and 1980s when 30,000 people in the UK (around of 3,000 them in Scotland) were infected with the HIV and Hepatitis C viruses. For 40 years there has been a cover-up by the NHS and government officials, and only now are we hearing apologies and talk of substantial compensation for lives ruined.

There was a similar decades-long cover-up over the faults in the Post Office's computer system. It led to more than 900 local post masters (around 100 in Scotland) being wrongly prosecuted and some were jailed for theft and other offences between 1996 and 2018. The public inquiry into that scandal rumbled on this week and both parliaments in Westminster and Holyrood are rushing through general pardons. There is finally talk of compensation.



General Assembly of the Church of Scotland 2024 Day Six Thursday: The final day of the Assembly with the Lord High Commissioner, His Grace the Duke of Edinburgh addressing the Assembly alongside the Moderator, Rev Dr Shaw Paterson. Heavy rain meant that the traditional clapping out had to be curtailed and people said their goodbyes in the Black and White Corridor

This loss of faith in public institutions is writ large in the results of the 2022 census released this week. Around 51 per cent of people said they had no religion, that's up by an astonishing amount since the last census in 2022 when it was 37 per cent. Only a fifth of Scots declared their religion as Church of Scotland, 13 per cent said they were Roman Catholics, 2 per cent said Muslim. There was a change too in how people perceived their nationality. 65 per cent said they were Scottish (up from 62 per cent) while those who said they were Scottish and British fell to just 8 per cent (down from 18 per cent last time).

The final shock from the census was to find that native Gaelic speakers in the heartland of the language, the Western Isles,

are now in a minority. However knowledge of Gaelic is growing, with 2.5 per cent of the population claiming to have some skill in the language.

Although not a question in the census, we know that Scotland is a football nation. The authorities reported 5 million attendances at games in the top four divisions last season. That's the highest rate in Europe. The women's game is growing too, with over 100,000 attendances. It might explain the excitement this week when the Scotland men's squad for the European finals was announced. It might explain why 200,000 Tartan Army fans are going to Munich next month to watch Scotland play Germany in the opening match.

It might also explain why Scotland will briefly forget about the election, and all our other uncertainties, on Saturday afternoon when Celtic play Rangers in the Cup Final at Hampden.