

Letter from Scotland

The election campaign is becoming more and more about Chiefs rather than Indians, personalities rather than politics.

It's all about how the party leaders behave, in TV debates, in set-piece interviews, in their antics on the campaign trail, in their personal slip-ups. So attention is focused on Rishi Sunak and Keir Starmer and their race to the door of Number 10 Downing Street. There's less attention on the teams competing for power, let alone the political movements and policies they represent.

Perhaps that is why Sir John Curtice and the National Centre for Social Research told us this week that nearly 80 per cent of people interviewed said the system of government needs to improve. 58 per cent said they would almost never trust politicians to tell the truth and 45 per cent said they would almost never trust the government to put country before party.

If they really believed what they told the pollsters, it's hard to see why over 60 per cent of the population turn out to vote.



Hail to the Chief, personalities and politics.
But clearly there is some disillusionment with professional politicians, so it was refreshing to see the audiences in the TV debates become the stars of the show. They raised real

pressing issues, on jobs, housing, health, education and demanded some answers. In Scotland, we had a BBC debate this week which featured the five main party leaders clashing with each other in their rush to provide answers, or at least slogans.

Two figures were thrown around the hall, £2,000 and £18bn. The Conservatives claim that Labour will be forced to put up taxes by £2,000 per year per household, if they really are to end "austerity" in the public services. The Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar disputed the figure but never-the-less declared: "read my lips, no austerity under Labour."

It was the SNP first minister John Swinney who trumpeted the £18bn of cuts he said both Labour and the Conservatives have signed up to. It's a figure worked out by the Institute for Fiscal Studies, based on the promises by both main parties that they will not put up any of the main taxes – income tax, national insurance or VAT.

Despite the audience's participation in the television debates, they were still pretty sterile. Everyone was on edge. The staging, both on BBC and ITV, did not help. They were like scenes from Star Wars, with the Lords of the Universe standing to alert behind podiums that resembled control desks. And the voters were kept well away from the Mighty, at the back of the hall.

The television companies, and at least some of the newspapers, have tried to highlight the real issues at stake on July 4th and explore the party manifestos which were published this week. They are all carefully worded, of course, not to make too many specific commitments. The Labour manifesto is particularly cautious, like Sir Keir Starmer himself. The SNP's tip-toes around the issue of new oil exploration in the North Sea. And it's still not clear what the route to independence would be, even if the party wins a majority of Scottish seats.

As for the Conservatives, they can promise the earth in the happy knowledge they will not have to save the planet. They are so far behind in the opinion polls, they've even been appealing to voters to make them a strong opposition. Their leader in Scotland Douglas Ross has casually announced he is resigning as leader at Holyrood, to concentrate on winning a seat at Westminster. The constituency in question is Aberdeenshire North and Moray East where the sitting candidate, David Duguid, has been unceremoniously removed while on sick leave. Life turns tough on a sinking ship.



Douglas Ross announcing he will stand in the General Election 2024 PHOTO © The Edinburgh Reporter

Away from politics, the news has been about festivals and stadiums. The Edinburgh Fringe has stuck with its sponsor, the investment firm Ballie Gifford, despite book festivals up and down the country severing their links because of a boycott by authors who object to the firm's investments in oil and gas. And as for stadiums, Murrayfield stadium in Edinburgh is recovering from staging three days of Talyer Swift concerts

and is talking of hosting more big music events.

The stadium we will all be watching on Friday evening is in Munich where Scotland play Germany in the opening match of the European Men's Football Championships. Win or lose, we all have faith that Scotland will go on to beat Switzerland and Hungary and qualify for the last 16. "Tread softly, for you tread on my dreams."



Baillie Gifford – Protest at Book Festival in 2023. © 2023 Martin McAdam