

Letter from Scotland

I had the privilege last Saturday to go to the hills and gain some perspective on our current affairs, namely football, politics and climate change.

It was the one clear day in a weekend of downpours. My companion and I were lucky to be in the right place at the right time to hire a guide to take us over the scary pinnacles of the famous Aonach Eagach ridge, strung by the mountain gods between two Munros on the north side of Glencoe.

When we weren't hanging on to the rocks for dear life, we were able to look down on the world below. Tiny cars were speeding along the A82. Loch Leven was glistening in the sunshine. Way out west we would see the Cuillins of Skye, to the north the snow-sprinkled top of Ben Nevis and, looking east over landscape that has not changed much since the Ice Age, we could see the cone of Schiehallion.



Looking down from a great height. The Aonach Eagach ridge in Glencoe. Photo John Knox

It allowed us to see the previous evening's football "disaster" in its proper proportion. Scotland going down 5-1 to Germany was just a minor blip in our glorious progress to the European Men's Football Championship. But then, football itself is just a minor blip in the life of the nation, even though 200,000 Scots have gone on pilgrimage to Germany watch the games.

Even the general election is a blip in the life of the nation. Though, the 4th of July looks like it will be a bigger blip than usual. We have just had a delivery of opinion polls showing Labour 20 points ahead and heading towards their biggest victory since 1951, and the Conservatives the biggest defeat in the party's 200 year-long history.

In Scotland, a Savanta poll predicts that Labour will win 29

seats (up from two at present). The SNP, it says, will drop to 17 (from 43), the Conservatives will win six and the Liberal Democrats five. A lot depends on how the vote falls in about dozen marginal seats, but the overall picture is as clear as the view from the Glencoe ridge.

So it's worth having a look at what Labour has in mind. No tax increases for working people and an end to "austerity", particularly in the health service. Apparently that will be paid for by extra windfall taxes on the oil companies and closing tax loop-holes used by the super-rich. If that doesn't work, then they'll rely on economic growth to provide enough government revenue. Various brainy think-tankers have raised eyebrows about that piece of wishful policy-making.

For the launch of the Scottish manifesto on Tuesday, the Scottish leader Anas Sarwar made much of Labour's idea to establish a Great British Energy Company, head-quartered in Scotland (probably Aberdeen) to invest £8bn in renewables. This he said would lead the transition out of fossil fuels – Labour has said it will not issue any new licences for oil exploration in the North Sea.

The SNP manifesto launch followed on Wednesday with John Swinney outlining his rather nuanced policy on new oil and gas fields. Each application will be treated on its merits and subject to a number of environmental tests. We were left on equally squelchy ground on the issue of independence. If the SNP win more than half the Scottish seats on 4th July, it won't mean a unilateral declaration of independence but a call for the UK government to allow a referendum. A call which Labour have said they won't listen to.

But the issue that seems to stir the blood most during this election is the poor state in which the Conservatives have left the NHS. I find it curious that this is the public service people say they care about most. I'm sure if schools were to close or councils fail to collect rubbish, voters

would care much more about that. These day-to-day services are actually more important for our long-term survival than hospitals. But the main political parties, to their shame, are only concerned with the short-term.

Climate change is perhaps the best example, the issue that needs more political leadership than any other. All parties have been back-pedalling on this, except of course the Greens (now at around six per cent in the opinion polls). Labour has watered down its £28bn climate change programme to just £8bn. The SNP have followed the Conservatives in postponing climate change targets on petrol cars and home boilers. (We learned this week that Scotland has again missed its carbon emissions target, that's the ninth year, out of the last 13 years.)

One important industry for climate transition is agriculture. But governments, north and south of the boarder, have left farmers floundering in uncertainty over prices, trade rules, environmental subsidies and their role in the future of the country. It will be interesting to see how much disquiet there is beneath the fair-ground razzmatazz of the Royal Highland Agricultural Show at Ingliston this weekend.

Farming may be an industry that has survived since the beginning of human civilisation but it is not as old, or as enduring, as the hills of Glencoe.



Phot Martin P McAdam