

Letter from Scotland

With just days to go till the general election, it looks as though we are about to see one of those great turns of the political tide.

The Conservatives have been in power for 14 weary years and Labour is heading for one of its biggest victories ever. Like shifting sand-dunes, the past will be covered over and a new landscape will be created.

No one knows what this new world will look like, because the Labour Party has not told us. Perhaps they themselves don't know what they will do, to grow the economy, end child poverty, fix the NHS and fund local councils. They are coming to the beach with two contradictory plans – end austerity but without increasing any of the big taxes.



Shifting sands. St Andrews.

The final leaders' television debate on Thursday exposed the empty bucket of Labour policies. Sir Keir Starmer clung on to credibility with vague promises to create a New Britain of prosperity for all. Rishi Sunak had plenty of plans for a new, smaller, low-tax Britain. But after 14 years of experiment with this ideology, the people are obviously fed up with "nothing working" and are prepared to trust in "change" of any kind.

It's been a bumpy campaign, interrupted by changeable weather, the D-Day commemorations, the European football championships, and the various festivals of the summer – Glastonbury, the Taylor Swift tour, the Royal Highland Show. It's also taking place against a background of the war in Gaza and in Ukraine – about which we have heard little – and the surprise election in France, where the battle between populism and democracy, now dividing Europe, is being played out.

We have unwelcome echoes of the battle here, with Nigel Farage and his new Reform Party beginning to recruit supporters from the gimlet-eyed wing the Conservative Party. The opinion polls are suggesting Reform has 16 per cent support, though it is much less in Scotland (6 per cent) because its bar-stool policies on immigration, Brexit and climate change do not impress the Scots.

There have been gaffs, and embarrassing incidents, for both Labour and the Conservatives during the six weeks of campaigning. Labour wasn't sure if one of its left-wing champions Dianne Abbot could stand as a candidate or not. Two other candidates were disowned, one for something he never said (Andy Brown in Aberdeenshire North), the other (Kevin Craig) for betting against himself to win in Suffolk.



The Conservatives had only just got over Rishi Sunak's ill-advised decision to leave the D-Day commemorations early when the betting craze caught up with them. Two candidates (Craig Williams and Laura Sanders) were suspended for betting on the date of the general election – allegedly with inside knowledge

of when it would be.

Throughout these debates and scandals, the opinion polls have steadily pointed to a 20 per cent lead for Labour, giving it the largest majority of seats in the House of Commons the party has ever had. As for the SNP, the latest opinion poll (Savanta for The Scotsman) puts it equal with Labour on 34 per cent support, with the Conservatives down to 14 per cent. However, the curious way in which the votes fall in the 12 most marginal constituencies, could result in Labour winning as many as 28 seats and the SNP falling to just 18.



First Minister John Swinney and Kaukab Stewart MSP lead Edinburgh Pride PHOTO ©2024 The Edinburgh Reporter

The SNP leader John Swinney has rather surprised everyone by the vigour with which he has fought this election. It's as if the bank manager had suddenly become William Wallace. The trouble is that Mr Swinney has had to defend 17 years of SNP rule, working within a budget largely determined by Westminster. But he's also fluffed a few lines, on independence and oil and gas, which has put him back in his bank manager's suit.

The Conservative leader in Scotland Douglas Ross also surprised everyone, by announcing his resignation in the middle of the campaign. This was, he explained, to concentrate on winning the seat of Aberdeenshire North, after he'd elbowed aside the sitting Conservative MP David Duguid who was on sick leave at the time. Douglas Ross, if he was in his weekend role as a part-time football referee, might have given himself a yellow card.

As the campaign went on, it grew more stodgy. Figures were contested, no further details were given on how policies would be implemented, messages were repeated over and over. The television companies and the newspapers tried their best to bring interest and clarity, with their debates and their tours around the constituencies. There was a conspiracy of silence over Brexit and climate change and a total lack of humour...not a chicken or scarecrow in sight, following the leaders around.

And the people in the street didn't do too well either, with their cynicism, lack of trust and their selfishness.

So we await the verdict of the people on Thursday. We will wake up to a New Britain on Friday and start building another house on the sand.



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