

Letter from Scotland

Strolling round the flower gardens at Saughton on a sunny summer's day made me feel that my little part of the world was at peace with itself.

The divisions of the general election are over. We have agreed on a new government and it has set out its programme for the next five years. The “brakes are off,” the prime minister says, and we are trundling towards a growth economy and national regeneration.

Saughton Park has undergone several regenerations, from a private estate on the western fringe of Edinburgh to the site of the Great Scottish Exhibition of 1908 – complete with a “Palace of Industries”, its own railway station, water chute, Senegalese village and 3.5 million visitors. More recently it's had an £8m makeover, giving it a new flower garden, reconditioned bandstand, a new café area and skate park. The theme now is transition towards a better environment –it even has its own hydro scheme on the Water of Leith.



Let a thousand flowers bloom. Saughton Park, Edinburgh. This sort of civic energy is obviously what the new Labour government is hoping to release as Sir Keir Starmer unveiled his plan to regenerate Britain. Of the 39 Bills announced in the King's Speech on Wednesday, 24 of them apply – at least in part to Scotland. The most exciting is Great British Energy, a new state-owned company, to be based somewhere in Scotland, with £8.3bn to invest in the transition to renewables.



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It's all that's left of Labour's original plan to spend £28bn on the green economy and it illustrates the "caution of office" which runs through the rest of the legislative programme. Looking through the list of Bills – strengthening employee rights, protecting tenants, a national wealth fund (raised from windfall taxes), rail nationalisation, border security, cyber resilience – all are measures that will only extend existing laws and all will take time to come into effect. But it's a start, and gives the impression of a new vigour in government.

All this excitement leaves the SNP and the Scottish Conservatives feeling a little left out and lost. The Conservatives are cast into a leadership election – in Scotland as well as Britain – with the party north of the border considering whether to break with the UK Tories and form an independent Scottish Conservative Party.

As for the SNP, there is an awkward squad – Jim Sillars, Alex Neil among them – who are calling for a change of leadership,

saying John Swinney is too tainted with the mistakes of the past. He won't be helped by the first findings of the Covid Inquiry under Baroness Hallett. She concluded that the Scottish government let its citizens down by accepting without question the decisions of the UK government, resulting in many wrong measures being taken during the pandemic.



Not much wonder then that the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey's latest report found that trust in the Scottish government has dropped from 61 per cent to 47 per cent of those questioned.

Two news stories this week do little to contradict that finding. Kate Forbes, the Deputy first minister, reminded people of the "ferries fiasco" at Ferguson's shipyard on the Clyde when she announced that the contract for seven small electric ferries would go out to open tender rather than be awarded to Ferguson's. Instead she offered the state-owned yard around £17million to modernise and prepare for other contracts. It's not great news for the 300 strong workforce, at a time when unemployment in Scotland is on the rise at 4.9

percent.

The second story involves the death of a 17 year-old boy. Jonathan Beadle died in Polmont Young Offenders Institution, a suspected suicide, weeks after parliament passed a law to end the imprisonment of children, and two years after the government vowed not to do so. Jonathan is not the only young person to die in prison in recent years, there have been three other cases. You wonder what the Prison Service and the justice secretary, Angela Constance, have been doing.

Another sad story we had this week is the stranding of 77 pilot whales on a beach in Orkney. It's thought to be the biggest stranding in Britain for over 100 years. Experts were called in to try to establish the cause but so far it remains a mystery. The image of so many black bodies lying in a line along that beautiful isolated beach will haunt me for ever.

As I write, the world's best golfers are struggling against the wind and rain on another shoreline, Royal Troon in Ayrshire. It's been staging the British Open since 1923. Over the four days of competition half a million people are expected to attend, every one of them with an umbrella. Golf fans have only just recovered from the Scottish Open at the Renaissance Course at North Berwick – won by our own Robert MacIntyre.

It's all part of a magical summer of sport which began with the European football championships, then tennis at Wimbledon and now the Olympic Games which start in Paris on Friday.

Among the 300 strong British team will be a goodly quota of Scots across the 25 sports. In athletics for instance we have 9 Scots in the 64 strong GB team, including our running stars Laura Muir, Eilish McColgan, Laura Muir and Josh Kerr. They will be literally following in the fast footsteps of Eric Liddell, who at the Paris Olympics a hundred years ago, won the 400 metre gold, having refused to run in his best event,

the 100 metres, because the heats were scheduled on a Sunday. That puts the “religion” of sport in its place.



Eric Liddell PHOTO courtesy of Eric Liddell Community