

# Letter from Scotland

**While I was cycling along the coastline of Galloway last week, the great news broke, but there were no flags, not bunting, no village parties.**

At the eastern end of the “park”, at Shambellie House Arts Centre, the rural affairs secretary Mairi Gougeon was announcing that Galloway had been chosen as the preferred region for Scotland’s third National Park.



Galloway – a new National Park ?

There now follows a consultation period of several months when all sorts of arguments will rage over: whether park status is needed at all; where exactly the boundaries should be; what the effect will be on farming, forestry, wind farms, housing, transport, tourism, the natural environment and climate change.

It's 15 years since Scotland, belatedly, designated its first two national parks, Loch Lomond and the Trossachs and the Cairngorms. Back in February, the Scottish government issued a glowing report of their success. They were good for the local economies and local people, for nature and the environment and had coped well with the growing number of visitors. But there is scepticism too from farmers and developers who have had to live with new rules and much interference.

Britain has 15 national parks in all, but they are very different from national parks in most other countries because the land is still owned by the original landlords. A national park authority – made up of local council representatives and government appointees – raises and distributes grants, lays down regulations, and employs staff to promote and protect the park. In Scotland the two national parks together are given a budget of £20m a year and have a staff of some 200 green-shirted officers.

Galloway would be about the same size as the Cairngorms (1,700 sq miles), stretching from Dumfries to Stranraer and Whithorn to Dalmellington and include such areas as the Rhins of Galloway, the Ayrshire coast, the Merrick Forest, the Machars, Criffel and Thornhill. The main towns are Newton Stewart and Kirkcudbright. It's a land of rolling hills, forests, dairy farms, fishing villages, stony beaches, Solway mud flats and quite a few peat bogs and salt marches.

Nowadays, it has the quiet air of a forgotten backwater – another reason for a national park, to open it up again for

business and pleasure. But it was busier in the past. On our cycle journeys we came across Iron Age forts, villages with Viking names, medieval priories and ancient churches inspired by the most famous person to land in Galloway, St Ninian in 397AD.

I wish the park campaigners all the best but I fear for their success. Investing in new environmental projects is not a big priority for either government, Labour at Westminster or the SNP at Holyrood. It's not a big priority with the public either, if the truth be told. The Scottish government has all but abandoned its plan for a marine national park along the north-west coast because of local opposition. There will be opposition in Galloway too. The National Farmers Union has already said a park is "unacceptable".

Several other bidders for national park status had to drop out because of lack of support, leaving only five in the running – Galloway, the Borders, Lochaber, Loch Awe and Tay Forest. Why Galloway has been chosen above the others will also become a point of regional rivalry. It's going to be hard for the government to fulfil its promise to have a new national park in place by 2026.

I came back from the tranquillity of Galloway and landed in the maelstrom of Edinburgh where double the usual population were gathering for the Festival. This year the theme is "rituals that unite us." The first one is on Friday night. As the sun sets there will be a light show in the grounds of George Heriot's School in which lasers, videos and live performances will conjure up "stories from a hidden world beneath our feet."



Bins overflowing in Edinburgh's Grassmarket 2022 PHOTO Alan Simpson

For the next three weeks, there will be the usual razzmatazz of 160 official shows and over 3,000 shows on the Fringe. To our dismay, we are also looking at a dust-bin workers strike, starting on the 14<sup>th</sup>, when council workers across Scotland begin their industrial action in pursuit of a 7 per cent pay rise. If rubbish piles up in the streets, as it did two years ago, our cultural reputation will, literally, be rubbish. Will the Scottish government find the money, as has happened in England, or will the new Chancellor's largess end at the border?

The director of the Festival, the violinist Nicola Benedetti, says government cuts to the arts in Scotland (10 per cent in the last budget) will eventually lead to "the end of civilisation". The difficulty the Scottish government faces is that it doesn't know what the total grant coming to Scotland will be as a result of the Chancellor's statement on Monday that she needs to find £22bn of savings. It looks, for

instance, as if it will have to accept her decision to target the universal £500 winter fuel payment on the 10 per cent who really need it.

Even in the summer sunshine and the excitement of the Festival, there's no getting away from those "difficult decisions."

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