

Letter from Scotland

It's the end of a chastening summer. The West Highlands had its wettest summer on record and in the east of the country, although drier, there's been many a cloudy, cool day. Even the success of the various festivals has been tinged with warnings about funding for the arts. At the Olympic Games, we seemed to be good at coming second.

But nowhere has the chastening been more hurtful than in the political summer season. The Conservatives and the SNP suffered major defeats in the general election and Labour supporters have watched as their victory has turned into more hard times ahead.

The dolesome messages from Sir Keir Starmer about things getting worse before they get better and from the Chancellor Rachel Reeves about a £20billion black hole in the nations' finances have been repeated here in Scotland by the first minister John Swinney and the finance secretary Shona Robison. She told The Scottish Parliament on its first day back from the summer break that she was forced to make £500 million of cuts (1% of the government budget) in public services this year. She would also have to take the remaining £450 million from the Scot Wind Fund, money from the sale of off-shore wind licences which was supposed to be reserved for the transition

to a low-carbon future.

She blamed “Westminster austerity” for the squeezed budget given to The Scottish government. But she has also, like Rachel Reeves, financed above-inflation pay deals with the public service unions. The Scottish Labour Party finds itself in the curious position of praising Rachel Reeves, but blaming Shona Robison for doing the same thing. The Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats say both are irresponsible but they won’t say the pay deals were wrong and they would have preferred a winter of strikes.



Quiet flows the Dee...through a fragile country. The easiest thing for everyone to do is kick the SNP, especially when it’s down. Its party conference last weekend was a hang-dog affair. The party has just seen its tartan army of MPs at Westminster cut from 48 to 9. John Swinney told the half-empty hall that the SNP would return to winning ways. It just had to explain that independence was the answer

to all the other problems – slow economic growth, poverty, poor public services.

A few days later he was in parliament outlining his Programme for Government. He named four priorities: ending child poverty, growing the economy, fixing the NHS and the transition to net zero by 2045. But instead of announcing big spending plans to achieve these ambitions, he tabled 14 new legislative bills, some of which may have a marginal effect on the “programme” but others may not. They include a bill to control rent rises and a carbon budget bill which replaces annual emissions targets, which are usually missed, with a “carbon budget”.

There’s also a bill imposing a safety levy on building firms, to discourage the use of unsuitable cladding materials. This week’s final report into the Grenfell fire disaster in London reminded us of how little has been done in the seven years since then to replace these dangerous materials on 105 buildings in Scotland. Only £9m of the £100m allocated to the task has actually been spent.

I can’t help thinking that if Mr Swinney really wanted to make ending child poverty his number one priority, he could start by doubling the Scottish Child Payment to £50 a week. It would benefit 400,000 children. The cost would be an extra £500m a year but he could raise that by cutting other budgets or targeting other benefits, as he is proposing to do on school meals and winter fuel payments. Instead we only have more gesture politics.

The SNP are not the only party with a post-summer depression. The Scottish Conservatives might have hung on to five seats in the general election but, like all Tories across Britain, they have seen their 14 years of economic experiments come crashing down.

There is a contest going on to replace Douglas Ross, who,

bizarrely, announced he was resigning as leader during the election campaign. Party members will vote on the three names left on the ballot paper, Russell Findlay, Murdo Fraser and Meghan Gallacher, and the result will be announced at the end of this month. Let us hope that Scottish party members are wiser than their English counterparts who elected the mad scientist Liz Truss.

So as we settle into autumn, there is plenty for our politicians to ponder. How, for instance can Labour get out of the straight jacket they made for themselves by promising "change" but saying they would keep all major taxes as they are ? How can the Tories find a new philosophy which doesn't involve ruining the public services ? How can the SNP stop making mistakes, like the council tax freeze, and get back to winning ways ? Should the Greens and the Liberal Democrats block the SNP's budget when it comes up for a vote in parliament ?

And should the rest of us just watch in despair or should we learn to pay higher taxes for the public services we enjoy ? Because that is what the madness of the summer has really been about.