

Letter from Scotland

While the rest of the world seems to be either at war or under flood waters, we are drifting into a quiet autumn. Not much is happening and that makes us lucky.

The harvest is home. Schools and universities are well into the new term. Workers' vans are buzzing around the towns and cities. The politicians are coming to terms with their triumphs and disasters over the summer.

We are however having to face up a number of domestic problems as autumn moves in. This week, for instance, we saw the health secretary Neil Gray struggling to save his National Care Service when the local authorities threatened to pull out. This centralised care service was supposed to end "bed blocking" in our hospitals and reduce waiting times.



autumn comes quietly to Arthur's Seat.

Then the transport secretary Fiona Hyslop had to announce that she could no longer pay the £40 million annual cost of scrapping peak-time fares on ScotRail. She said the experiment had failed to produce the 10 per cent increase in passengers needed to pay for itself, although that figure is disputed. She was also embarrassed to learn that the four ferries being built in Turkey for Caledonian MacBrayne will be six months late.

We learned too that deaths due to alcohol misuse are at a 15 year high (1,277 in 2023) despite the government's minimum unit price of 50p. The price went up to 65p this week. Let's hope it's more successful in deterring dangerous drinking. The figure almost matches the number of drug deaths (1,172) which is up 12 per on the year before and keeps Scotland at the top of the European table of shame.

It was gratifying to hear that one of our most notorious drug

barons has been caught and jailed for 20 years. James Stevenson, known in the underworld as the "ice man", ran a cocaine importing business from Ecuador worth £76m. French police managed to infiltrate his communication system and consignments of the drug were found in banana boxes in Dover bound for the Glasgow fruit market. Four other men are waiting to be sentenced for their part in the racket.

Housing is another problem which broke surface again this week. The Labour Party went to parliament to accuse the SNP government of being out of touch with the "housing emergency" it itself had declared earlier this year. Over 31,000 people in Scotland are registered as homeless. Some 10,000 children are in temporary accommodation, according to the housing charity Shelter. The reasons given are high rents, high mortgage rates, and a shortage of social housing. Only 5,000 "affordable" homes were completed last year and only 21,000 have been built towards the government's target of 110,000 by 2032.

Labour pointed to the 26 per cent cut in the social housing budget announced by the finance secretary Shona Robison earlier this year. It's since been reduced to 22 per cent (£167m) and, just in time for the debate in parliament on Tuesday, a further £22m found for housing. But it was all dismissed as a drop in the ocean by the opposition parties.

Of course none of them suggested where the money should come from and the SNP blamed it all on Westminster "austerity." There was a 9 per cent cut in the capital allocation to Scotland in the last budget.

It all points to shambolic and rather cowardly leadership by our political chiefs. The Starmer government has not had a glorious week with news of dubious personal donations to ministers – as if well-paid MPs need a clothing allowance or free tickets to football matches. The Conservative leadership contenders have shown little remorse for the mess they left

the country in, or any plan for sorting it out. The new Conservative leader in Scotland, Russell Findlay, has confined himself to saying: “We need to do things differently, we need to do them better.”



Conservative MSP Russell Findlay

Pic:Andy Barr

It makes you want to join the good people of Wigtown in getting away from the madness at their [25th annual Book Festival](#). This village, of just a thousand people, tucked away on a muddy coast in Galloway set itself up as a “book town” following the closure of its dairy business and now has around a dozen quaint little bookshops. The festival is drawing to an end this weekend after 10 days of fun, beginning with a parade and fireworks and continuing with some 200 events, including talks, readings, music, theatre, art exhibitions and, of course, book sales. Some 13,000 book enthusiasts descent on the town each year.

Wigtown is one of three book festivals in Scotland – the Edinburgh International Book Festival and the Melrose Book

Festival being the others. It's not as if we are a great book-reading nation – the UK as a whole is about half way down the book-reading league in Europe. In Scotland the Literacy Trust says only one in four young people between 8 and 18 read daily in their spare time.

Scotland has produced some great writing in the past but I don't really blame people for not reading the novels we turn out today – they all seem to be about crime or broken lives. (Even JK Rowling I find quite frightening.) The one shining exception is Alexander McCall Smith whose stories always end happily, as most life does, at least in quiet Scotland.



James Cosmo at Wigtown Book Festival, Wigtown, Dumfries & Galloway, Scotland, Sun 29/09/2024:

Scottish actor James Cosmo (pictured in his book show) – who has appeared in no less than 130 Hollywood movies – made a sell-out appearance during the first weekend on the Wigtown Book Festival. Known for everything from Braveheart and

Highlander to Game of Thrones, The Chronicles of Narnia, Troy and Trainspotting, he spoke in a book show about his long career and the people he has met along the way.

Photography for Wigtown Festival Company from: Colin Hattersley Photography