

Letter from Scotland

Life is not getting any easier for the brave people who live on Scotland's 93 inhabited islands. This week brought more dismal news from Caledonian MacBrayne that ferry services on the west coast are being reduced over the winter.

There are rumours too that the Post Office is planning to close its main offices in Stornoway and Kirkwall. It adds to the sense of decline and abandonment being felt in the islands.

Much has changed since the cheery days of Para Handy's steam puffer delivering coal and vital supplies to the islands in the early 1900s. The population has fallen by a quarter to around 100,000. It's falling by 5 per cent every 10 years in the Hebrides and by between 1 and 5 per cent elsewhere, except for Orkney which appears to be bucking the trend.



Island life...needing a vital spark. Photo by Dave Gibbons. The reasons are pretty clear – a lack of jobs and housing and worries over school closures, doctors' services, communication links, and the loss of "critical mass" to make communities work. There are worries too over the loss of local culture, particularly Gaelic – less than half the population of the Western Isles are native Gaelic speakers.

There is even concern over climate change, with the islands being exposed to ever more violent storms. Like Storm Ashley in October, which saw winds of 78mph hit the island of Tiree, the worst for 50 years. Just the month before, delegates to the first ever Outer Hebrides Climate Conference (OH-COP1) were warning of the increased risk of violent storms, floods, damage to causeways and coastal erosion. It's a message being repeated for islands on a global scale at the COP29 Conference in Azerbaijan.

The Scottish Government is trying to stem the tide of depopulation decline and give islanders an equal deal with the mainland. There's been a big roll-out of broadband

connections. Gaelic medium schools have been established in the Western Isles. There's a "road equivalent tariff" to keep the price of ferry tickets down. Loss making routes being flown by Loganair are subsidised, including the famous flight that lands on the beach at Barra.

But in the end, those living on the islands have to accept that they cannot expect the convenience of living in or near a city. Many don't want all that comes with it – congestion, noise, pollution, vandalism and the easy softness of city life.

It's not been an easy week for Neil Gray, the Health Secretary. He had to apologise to parliament for using his ministerial car to attend Aberdeen football matches. He also had to pause plans for a new National Care Service because it lost the support of the care homes, the local authorities, the trade unions and, crucially, the seven Green MSPs required to get the legislation through parliament. He hopes to go back to the negotiating table to see what can be salvaged of the scheme which would replace local council care services with a national service. I doubt if he will get anywhere unless he can provide huge sums of money to pay for it.

It's not been a good week for the SNP generally. They had to u-turn on their recycling scheme for bottles and cans. The scheme collapsed when the Westminster government said it should not include glass bottles and should wait for a UK wide scheme due to come into operation in 2027. The recycling minister, Gillian Martin, has now accepted that the scheme should go ahead without glass. Meanwhile one of the companies which spent large sums of money on vehicles and equipment is suing the Scottish government for nearly £170m.

Then there is something of a row developing within the party over some of its nine MPs at Westminster seeking to become candidates in the Scottish Parliament election in 2026. The party has yet to decide if someone can serve in two

parliaments at the same time. Among those wishing to join the ranks in the Scottish parliament is Stephen Flynn, the leader of the SNP at Westminster and some believe it's a manoeuvre to become leader of the party in both places.

Finally, vets at Edinburgh Zoo say they are pretty sure one of their [red pandas](#) was literally scared to death by fireworks on Bonfire Night. Three month old "Roxie" apparently died from swallowing his own vomit. It's suspected his mother "Ginger" also died a few days earlier from the effects of fireworks in the area. The staff are calling for a ban on fireworks anywhere near the zoo.

Fireworks have been one of the hazards of city living since Guy Fawkes started the craze in 1605. Perhaps red pandas and other sensitive creatures should live on a quiet Scottish island.