

Letter from Scotland

I've been looking back through my diary of this year and three recurring stories leap out of its pages – wars, climate change and elections.

From all of them, Scotland has escaped unharmed. We have looked out on a troubled and angry world from a peaceful, temperate and very fortunate land.

The wars in Ukraine, Gaza, Lebanon, Yemen and Sudan have reached us only in the form of dreadful scenes on television, appeals from aid charities and a trickle of refugees. We have had to stand back and watch a divided and timid United Nations unable to stop Putin and Netanyahu do whatever they like, to take vengeance on their enemies.



Peaceful Scotland in a troubled world. St Giles' Cathedral, Edinburgh.

On the climate emergency, we watched catastrophic flooding hit Spain, Eastern Europe, Brazil, China, Bangladesh, even parts of England and Wales. We've seen violent storms wreak destruction in the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean islands, and the southern United States. And yet, the world seems in retreat on measures to curb carbon emissions. The COP climate conference in Azerbaijan could only produce a flimsy compromise.

And despite all the elections this year, democracy is in an unusually fragile condition. Over half the world's population went to the polling stations this year in 100 countries – India, South Africa, Nigeria, the USA, Mexico, France, Ireland and here in Britain, the fabled home of parliamentary democracy. But in all of them the results revealed deep divisions in their societies and a general disillusionment

with governments and politicians. And so the rise of extremist parties.



New Prime Minister Sir Keir Starmer with former Prime Minister, Rishi Sunak at the State Opening of Parliament ©House of Commons

Here in Scotland, the UK general election in July was peaceful enough but it gave us dramatic results – the Labour Party came storming back from having just one MP to having 37 while the SNP fell from 48 to 9.

It's not been a brilliant year for the SNP. Their leader Humza Yousaf had to resign in April after making two major errors: announcing another council tax freeze when councils were struggling to keep local services going, and ending the coalition agreement with the Greens. The party then called back a former leader John Swinney to steady the ship and take charge as first minister. But he immediately ran into the headwinds of real cuts in funding from Westminster and the global cost-of-living crisis.

The independence movement also lost its most successful leader Alex Salmond who died suddenly in October at the age of 69. But even his reputation was tarnished by his public falling-out with his protégée Nicola Sturgeon and his bizarre decision to flounce off and form his own Alba Party.



Then First Minister Alex Salmond launching the Scottish National Party's campaign as the first full week of the general election campaign got underway. PHOTO Alan Simpson

Scotland has not been untouched by climate change this year. We've had our storms – Isha in January, Ashley in October and Bert in November – but we've escaped lightly, with winds of 60 mph, and not nearly as much rain and floods as in England and Wales. We did however have our wettest summer on record and the autumn has swung from being unusually mild to severely cold (minus 11°C in Braemar).

Scientists are still trying to work out if climate change is responsible for sightings of unusual beluga (white) whales off Shetland and the stranding of 77 pilot whales on a beach in Orkney in July. Not to mention the dramatic decline in the

population of sea birds.

But despite the increasing impact of climate change, The Scottish Government has joined the global retreat from climate action. Annual emission targets have been dropped, the plastic bottle return scheme has been postponed and there's no longer a presumption against new oil exploration in the North Sea and Eastern Atlantic. Instead there's a headlong rush for any kind of economic growth which, strangely, is seen as the only way of improving public services.

In Scotland we've not suffered from the culture wars in England and the USA but we've had earnest public discussions, shall we call them, over a number of sensitive issues during the year. They include gender recognition, sexual violence against women, early release from prison, assisted dying, the targeting of welfare benefits, arts funding and various town-versus country matters, like agricultural subsidies, land ownership and wildlife crime.

We can always escape into the happier world of sport. Scotland sent 34 athletes to the Paris Olympics as part of the BG team. We watched Duncan Scott win his 8th gold medal in the swimming and sympathised with runners Laura Muir and Eilish McColgan in their disappointments.

In football, we had that glorious moment of our men's team playing the opening game at the World Cup – only to go down 5:1 to the hosts Germany. Women's football has been getting more television coverage this year, though the national side just failed to qualify for the World Cup, beaten at the post by the Republic of Ireland. And in rugby, Scotland had the pleasure of beating England in the Six Nations, though we threw the glory away in the next match against Italy. In the autumn internationals, Scotland won four of its five matches, ending with an impressive 27-13 win over Australia.

Last weekend we got a cracking game in the final of the League

Cup between Celtic and Rangers. It ended 3-all at the end of extra time and Celtic ended up winning on penalties. And of course there was the usual controversy, this time over a VAR decision on a jersey-tugging incident inside/outside the penalty box.

If I had just a few words to sum up the year 2024 for Scotland, I'd say: "Fate, the universal referee, let us off lightly."



Autumn Series: Scotland v Fiji 02/11/2024 Scotland hooker, Ewan Ashman, dives over the line to put the home side 5-0 in front as Scotland take on Fiji in their first game of the Autumn Series at Scottish Gas Murrayfield
Credit: Ian Jacobs