

Letter from Scotland

We are treading gently into the New Year. Scotland finds itself at peace, free from floods and famine, and enjoying the comforts of one of the richest countries on Earth.

Such troubles as we have are self-imposed – creaking public services, pockets of relative poverty and ill-health, a housing shortage, climate change. They are caused either by a failure to raise enough tax or by a failure to change our habits.

What is surprising is that no one seems to care. We go gaily on from year to year hoping our problems will go away. Or at least that they are not serious enough for revolution, demonstration or reform. So in the year ahead I don't see much change in the old Scotland we have grown to tolerate.



What's round the corner in 2025 ?

A quarter of our children are living in households with less than 60 per cent of the average income. Our drink and drug deaths are among the highest rates in Europe. The prisons are over-crowded. NHS waiting times are at an all-time high. There's a crisis in the care services. The schools are 3,500 teachers short and the universities are relying on foreign students to keep them financially afloat. But hey ho, the wind and the rain.

The politicians are hoping that "economic growth" will solve all our problems. If only the economy would grow, they say, tax receipts would increase and that would give the government the money it needs to eliminate poverty, restore the public services and even leave a little over for action against climate change.

But hey ho, the economy is not growing. And it won't, until the government spends or "invests" in all of the above. No

one seems to be asking: "Why wait for economic growth?" What's wrong with a bit of re-distribution now, from the rich half of the population to the poorer half and from private wealth to public services ? The SNP government has introduced slightly higher tax rates on high-earners than in England and Wales but it only raises £1.5bn extra, a tiny fraction of the overall government budget of £40bn. And local council tax remains well below the levels in England.

The first minister John Swinney is being characteristically cautious because he only has a little over a year to go before the next Scottish election. Support for independence is holding up, sometimes at over 50 per cent, but the main issue in May 2026 is likely to be the competence of the SNP in government.

The Labour leader Anas Sawar is hoping his colleagues in London give him "competence" in spades – on the economy, the public service, the welfare system – to continue Labour's revival in Scotland and even form the next government at Holyrood. There's little sign that the Conservatives will be able to recover from their general election disaster in time for the Scottish elections. And they are being chased from their usual habitats by the Liberal Democrats on the left and the Reform Party on the right.

I predict a slow grinding battle between the parties over the next year but with little progress on any side. It will be other issues that make the interesting news, particularly the afore-mentioned wind and the rain. The summers are getting hotter and wetter, the springs just wetter, the winters stormier. The weather is definitely going to win the battle of climate change. All parties, except the Greens, are in retreat over the issue. Targets are being pushed back. Habits such as car driving and flying are not changing. The storms without might rattle and rustle, but no one will care a whistle. The climate will go on changing but we won't. Hey ho the wind and the rain.

But as I say, we are lucky in this part of the world. We may pray for peace in the Middle East, for the downfall of Putin, for the Trump administration to collapse from its own absurdities, but we are only on-lookers. Even from the side lines, however, we can cheer or boo and stand up for European values. And in the crusade against climate change, every country has its part to play.

In expecting a tranquil 2025 for Scotland, there is always the possibility of a surprise. We are watching the year unfold, live. As a former orchestra conductor of mine used to say to us before a performance: "I love live music. It's so exciting, because anything can happen !"