

# Letter from Scotland

It blew in from the west last Friday bringing winds of 100mph and a fine spray which covered much of Scotland and closed us down for the day. The first storm of the year, Storm Éowyn, brought down trees by the hundreds, closed all schools, cancelled all train and ferry services and left 200,000 homes without electricity. A 19 year old man was killed when a tree fell on his car as he was driving on a minor road in Ayrshire.

This wild horse or wild spirit Éowyn – an old English name adopted by J.R.R Tolkein for one of his Princesses in Lord of the Rings – was another warning from the gods about climate change. The Royal Botanic Garden in Edinburgh was given a severe lesson. Its tallest tree – a 29 metre cedar, planted in 1859 – was brought down, and another 15 trees with it, not to mention the 120 panes of glass broken in the greenhouses.



### Counting the cost of Storm Éowyn

Not that either of our governments is paying attention. They are still going for grey economic growth. The Chancellor Rachel Reeves has announced plans for another runway at Heathrow Airport but nothing for the conversion of the Grangemouth refinery into a centre for the production of aviation eco-fuel. In fact, there wasn't much mention of Scotland in her whole plan for economic growth. Except that Scottish exports of whisky and salmon will be speeded up, once the new runway at Heathrow is open, in 15 years' time, if it opens at all.

The Scottish government's budget of £40bn has little in it for the environment. It allows only £600m in total for green jobs, home insulation, transport and woodlands. The main spending increases are for the NHS and local government services, and these are largely to fund the wage rises agreed last year (around 5 percent).

Despite this, the Greens this week decided to support the budget, as did the Liberal Democrats. Both got minor concessions for their favourite policies, in all amounting to £116m. The Labour Party has decided to abstain, asking for no changes at all. So the SNP has won a majority in parliament for the final vote next month on its environment-lite budget, without having to concede very much. Only the Conservatives are proving awkward and will be voting against out of habit.

Meanwhile, environmental campaigners have welcomed a court ruling that permission granted by the last Conservative government to drill for oil in the Rosebank field off Shetland and gas in the Jackdaw field off Aberdeen is unlawful. The judge said the impact on the climate of burning fossil fuels had not been taken into account and new permission will need to be sought. Meantime, preparatory work can go ahead (Shell has already spent £800m building the Jackdaw platform) but no gas or oil may be extracted. It's a major victory for Greenpeace and Uplift and, given the Labour government's policy of no new oil or gas fields, it probably means the end of these two controversial projects.

The whole country has been shocked, and shamed, by a court case involving a drugs den in Glasgow in which seven addicts abused three young children over a period of seven years. The charges included rape and attempted murder. The children were eventually rescued by a neighbouring couple. The gang, two women and five men all in their 40s or 50s, were sentenced to between eight years and 20 years each. Questions must surely be asked about how such horrific abuse could go undiscovered for such a long time.

On a more redeeming note, Glasgow has spent the last fortnight hosting the annual Celtic Connections folk-music festival. It's a huge event, 300 events actually, with over 2,000 musicians from around the world taking part. There have been between 8 and 18 events every night, ranging from traditional

folk, to jazz and blues, talks, workshops, exhibitions and musical walking tours. It ends on Sunday night with a performance from the Finnish band Frigg playing Nordic music with the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra.

And at the other end of the country, folk in Shetland are recovering from Tuesday night's "Up-Helly Aa" festival. This year 40 squads of heavily costumed "Vikings" paraded through Lerwick with flaming torches and set their longboat on fire. Women have finally made it into the front rank of the warriors for just the second year in the event's 140 year history. It was established by the Total Abstinence Society to give the wild young men of Shetland something exciting to do rather than drink the winter away.

It seems the sober Shetlanders didn't notice Storm Éowyn. The Shetland Times simply advised its readers: "The Hjaltland will depart Aberdeen at 1pm (on storm Friday) and is due to arrive in Lerwick in the early hours of Saturday. It is likely to make for an eventful crossing for the many folk sailing up to attend the Up-Helly-Aa."

Like the rest of the country, Shetland is trying hard to play down the on-coming storm of climate change.



Vikings from Shetland's South Mainland Up Helly Aa' Jarl Squad led the Torchlight Procession through Edinburgh city centre in 2023 for the first time since 2019. PHOTO Craig Duncan/Airborne Lens