

Letter from Scotland

We've had a week of gloriously sunny weather. But the air outside has been disappointingly cold. This has given us two ways of looking upon life. We are cheerful looking out of the window but miserable once outside.

And so it has been with the news – lots of troubles, but when the sun shines they don't look so bad. We Scots like to moan, but compared with the rest of the world, we've had a good week.



Facing up bravely to our troubles. Dawyck Gardens.
The dry sunny days have been wonderful. But they have caused some 90 wildfires in several parts of the country. Glen Rosa on the Island of Arran suffered a major fire. Campers in the

Galloway Forest Park had to be rescued by helicopter. Fires broke out at Morar along the Harry-Potter train line between Fort William and Malaig. Firefighters were out tackling a fire at Inverpolly Forest north of Ullapool and on the Isle of Skye a mile-long fire at Glendale took several hours to bring under control. But all this is nothing compared to what has happened in California, or Spain or Crete.

If this is climate change, then we doing little about it. The government has scrapped its annual emissions target, after failing to reach it for years. The phasing out of petrol-driven vehicles has been postponed till 2035 and the legal requirement to stop the installation of home gas boilers has been abandoned. Not much wonder that figures out this week show there's been a 15 per cent bounce-back in emissions since 2021 and the Covid pandemic.

But looking out of the sunny window, our renewables capacity grew in the last year from 15GWs to 16GWs and the pollution from the Grangemouth refinery is to end with its closure in the summer.

The decline of the health and social care services have been brought into sharp focus this week by a report from the government's own Fiscal Commission. It warns that, unless there are big changes, spending will have to rise from 40 per cent to 55 per cent of the entire Scottish government budget over the next 25 years as the number of old people increases. It points out that the average health care spending for someone over 70 is £6,000 a year and for someone over 80 it rises to £8,000. It says such expenditure is not sustainable and it argues for a radical switch to preventive measures and a healthier lifestyle.

But again, compared to the rest of the world, we are lucky to have a national health service at all. We just need to learn to pay for it through higher taxes or a retirement levy.

The financial troubles afflicting our 18 universities have been in the news again this week. Chronic under-funding from the government over the last 10 years (down by nearly 40 per cent) has led to universities relying on high-fees from foreign students. It doesn't quite cover the shortfall and, in any case, the number of foreign students is dwindling. Scottish students, of course, do not have to pay tuition fees but the "free university" pledge by the SNP government is now coming into question.

Edinburgh university staff are being balloted on strike action in protest at plans to cut £140m or 20 per cent from its annual budget. There have already been 15 days of strike action at Dundee University over its plans to cut over 600 jobs. An emergency grant of £22m has been provided to keep the university afloat. At Robert Gordon's University in Aberdeen 135 jobs are at risk. It's thought over half of Scotland's universities are running a deficit.

It's all led to a national debate over what universities are for and how they should be funded. The debate also extends to our 24 technical colleges which have suffered a similar cut in funding. We are now wondering where the next generation of tradesmen and women, engineers, doctors, nurses, teachers and artists are to come from. And it sure is a funny way to promote economic growth, which is supposed to be the government's top priority.

It's also a funny way to promote research and imagine a new world. Take the discovery of penicillin for example, being celebrated this week in Sir Alexander Fleming's home town of Darvel in Ayrshire. A large mural, by the Glasgow artist "Roque One" has appeared on a building in the town showing Fleming holding up a slide to the light and noticing a strange fungus attacking the bacteria there. It was the beginning of the antibiotic revolution which has saved millions of lives across the world.



Sir Alexander Fleming

If this younger son of an Ayrshire farmer had not had a good school in Darvel and Kilmarnock, a place at a polytechnic in London and eventually a university lab, he might never have made his great discovery. Such breakthroughs give us hope that science may come to our aid.

To do that we need to be much braver about raising tax and facing up to the worrying news we've had this week.