

Letter from Scotland

Schiehallion, the mountain that stands proud in the middle of Scotland, frowned down on us as we cycled along the shore of Loch Tummel on Good Friday. It's as if he, or she, was saying: "What on earth is going on down there?"

This week we have found ourselves debating "extremism", fighting another round in the culture war over sex and gender, facing both ways on climate change and wondering what the death of the Pope means – even for those who are not Roman Catholics.

Any mountain, but Schiehallion in particular, reminds us of eternal things. It has stood there for 430 million years, a silent, cone-shaped hill, watching the lochs and glens being formed, glaciers passing by, farmers tilling the soil, and now cyclists out on a holiday ride.



Rock of Ages. Schiehallion from Loch Tummel

Because of its regular shape, it was chosen for a grand experiment to calculate the weight of the Earth. In 1774 the astronomer royal Sir Nevil Maskelyne and a team of hardy scientists set up camps on the north and south side of the mountain. They were there for two years watching how the plumb lines in their theodolites diverged from the perpendicular because of the mass of the mountain. It all involved observations from 73 stars and measuring the density and volume of the mountain itself and then a devilishly difficult size-up calculation to reach a result that was within 20 per cent of what we now know is the mass of Planet Earth, 5.9×10^{24} kilogrammes.

I mention all this to give a wider perspective to our week of news. The death of Pope Francis, the 266th Pope, also allows us to wonder at the 1,800 year history of the world's oldest institution. The fact too that he led a congregation of

1.3billion people across the globe is impressive.

Here in Scotland there are 841,000 Catholics, compared to 1.7million Church of Scotland members and 1.9million people of no religion. Special services to mark the Pope's death have been held in churches across the country. The First Minister, John Swinney said: "Pope Francis championed the virtue of compassion and advocated for the poor and marginalised across the world." He will be attending the funeral in Rome on Saturday.

Relations between Catholics and Protestants in Scotland have not always been great and sectarianism continues to be a problem. It's not helped, in my view, by the existence of 360 state-funded Catholic schools, 14 per cent of all schools. In 2016 leaders of the Church of Scotland and the Catholic Church signed the St Andrew Declaration which sought to ease tensions and focus on "shared humanity". The Catholic Church in Scotland has also had its share of historic abuse scandals, including the resignation of Cardinal Keith O'Brien in 2013 just as he was about to set off for Rome to take part in the Conclave which elected Pope Francis.

We all make mistakes. At First Minister's Questions, John Swinney was asked to apologise to the women of Scotland over the shambles on gender recognition. The Conservative leader, Russell Findlay, also accused him of wasting public money defending gender self-identification which ended with last week's defeat for the government at the Supreme Court.

Mr Swinney said he accepted the ruling that a women was defined by her sex at birth and he promised there would be new guidance on women-only spaces in schools, hospitals and sport changing rooms. Already Borders Council has conceded a case at the Court of Session and accepted a parents' demand that the new primary school at Earlstoun should change its gender-neutral toilets.

On Wednesday, John Swinney chaired the first of his civic summits against extremism and “the far right” which he says is endangering democracy in Scotland. He had in mind Nigel Farage’s Reform Party which is now polling at 17 per cent in Scotland. We saw a rather grim gathering at The Merchants House of Glasgow agree that something had to be done to restore faith in old democracy, but alas the promised “concrete steps” were not defined.

Meanwhile, up on the Moray Firth, the latest off-shore wind farm was opened by The Secretary of State for Scotland, Ian Murray, and has begun feeding electricity into the grid. Its 60 turbines can produce enough electricity to supply half of Scotland’s homes. It follows two other large wind farms already operating there and a fourth is due to built by 2030. But while all this is good news for the climate, we also had a story this week about a multi-million redevelopment at Glasgow Airport and the Scottish government dropping its target of reducing car travel by 20 per cent by 2030.

All this shifting and sliding is in stark contrast to the solidity of Schiehallion which will still be the same when our civilisation is gone, even its oldest institution. That’s what makes it so impressive, and intimidating, to anyone who cycles by.

I'm in Buckie today to officially power up Ocean Winds' Moray West offshore wind farm – which will power 1.3 million homes – HALF the homes in Scotland.

Investments like this are living proof that Scotland and its workers are benefitting from the skilled jobs and economic growth... pic.twitter.com/VJaFtsfkfa

– Ian Murray MP (@IanMurrayMP) [April 24, 2025](#)