

Letter from Scotland

The politicians, north and south of the border, have now bowed to the reality that the coronavirus can no longer be confined to those who have been infected abroad. The virus is loose in the population and is attacking us. Ordinary life is going to be disrupted, the economy badly damaged.

It has already prompted a Conservative Chancellor to throw ten years of orthodox austerity overboard and announce the biggest government spending programme for nearly three decades including a promise to spend “whatever it needs” to support the NHS in the fight against this invasion.

But that is what Rishi Sunak’s budget has done. Most of the £30bn annual increase in government spending will go on UK-wide projects – sick pay, National Insurance relief, benefit increases, broadband. The Scottish Government will get an additional £630m to spend as it sees fit. Actually, most of that was anticipated and has already been allocated in last month’s Scottish budget. But it doesn’t include Scotland’s share of the £5bn set aside for the coronavirus and that may well be needed.

Finance Secretary Kate Forbes is on the case:

I’ve written to the Treasury this afternoon about [#Covid19](#) funding for Scotland ☐☐ In the absence of clarity on figures, I will proceed with an estimate of consequential funding. <https://t.co/jxggTGrvtd>

What worries me about all this is that it is funded almost entirely by borrowing and there is no plan for tax increases which will be needed in the long term to pay back the debt, due to reach £290bn by 2024. I suspect Mr Sunak is so concerned about the shock coming to the economy from Brexit, and the uncertainty over the effects of the coronavirus that he feels he'd better not mention higher taxes right now.



Scotland can no longer “contain” the Coronavirus, we must now delay its spread.

In Scotland we’ve also now moved from the “containment” phase of the coronavirus outbreak to the “delay” phase. As I write, we have 60 confirmed cases of the disease, many of which cannot be traced back to travel to or from China or Italy. The fear is that we are on the brink of a widespread infection. The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has announced that public gatherings of 500 people or more are being banned. People suffering from a cough and fever but whose symptoms remain mild will no longer be tested for the disease and are asked to stay at home for seven days. But as yet, schools and colleges are not being closed.

There are, though, increasing signs of anxiety, if not panic,

in everyday life. Even small social and sporting events are being called off by the organisers. The traditional tea and biscuits are not being served. Holidays abroad are being cancelled, like my orchestra's trip to Iceland. (*You play in an orchestra? Ed.*) Indeed, holidays at home are being re-thought and hotels and B&B owners are losing bookings like water draining down a sink. There's a lot of hand-washing and hand-wringing going on.



Former First Minister Alex Salmond on his way into the High Court on 12 March 2020 PHOTO ©2020 The Edinburgh Reporter
There's a lot of political hand-wringing going on too over the Alex Salmond trial which began this week. There's a mixture of shock, embarrassment and prurience in the air as details of our former First Minister's sexual behaviour are paraded in front of the jury at the High Court in Edinburgh. He's facing 14 charges of sexual assault, including attempted rape, involving ten women, all while he was First Minister. The trial is due to last four weeks and has begun with prosecution

witnesses giving shocking evidence from behind court-room screens to protect their identity. Mr Salmond denies all the charges and his lawyers are seeking to prove either that the encounters were consensual, or that he or they were elsewhere at the time.

In other court rooms, we may be set for a new hearing into the Lockerbie bombing. The Criminal Cases Review Commission has ruled that the family of Abdelbaset Ali Mohmed al-Megrahi can appeal against his conviction for his role in the bombing of Pan Am flight 103 in December 1988. Megrahi himself died in Libya eight years ago after his controversial release from a Scottish jail due to ill-health.

The Commission says his family can appeal on the grounds of an “unreasonable verdict” and the non-disclosure of evidence.

Despite the Chancellor’s plans for big infrastructure projects in “the North”, there was no mention in the budget of Boris’s Bridge (from Scotland to Northern Ireland). Last week the UK government’s man in Scotland, the Scottish Secretary Alister Jack, told MSPs that, actually, what Boris meant was a 20 mile tunnel. But this week the economic think tank The Fraser of Allander Institute published a report saying there’s no evidence that a bridge or a tunnel would improve either country’s economic performance and the £15bn cost would be better spent on other projects.

As one fine vision sinks beneath the waves, another takes its place – the long-held dream of Sir Sean Connery to establish a film studio in Edinburgh. His son Jason and film producer John Last have agreed to take over a former factory at Leith Docks and

run it as a permanent film studio. It's already been used for one-off film projects, including the Avengers and The Princess Switch.



John Last and Jason Connery PHOTO Stewart Attwood.

I wonder if Connery and Last would be interested in Edinburgh University's geo-science department's latest discovery...evidence of a new dinosaur on the Isle of Skye. Fifty fossilised footprints are said to show that a smaller member of the Stegosaur family once lived on Skye 170 million years ago when it was part of a large island in middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Skye was apparently crowded with dinosaurs in the Mid-Jurassic period, from long-necked Sauropods to cousins of Tyrannosaurus Rex. But adding hard-backed Stegosaur to the population will allow scientists to trace the evolution of dinosaurs more accurately.

Until, that is, they disappeared, victims of a meteor strike, or global warming, or disease, or just

their own foolish decisions. Perhaps the movie should be called "Jurassic Park VII – lessons for all of us."