

Letter from Scotland

Like many countries across the world, we are a nation under siege. This tiny bug, Covid-19, spreading a fairly mild and well known illness, is challenging our social and economic system in a way not seen since the Second World War.

Our hospitals are near breaking point, our schools are closed, perfectly viable businesses are having to rely on government loans, the transport system is hollowed out, all sport and social venues are locked up.

And as individuals we face the challenge of accepting government advice to isolate ourselves from others and remain calm and stoical.

If it were just a case of suffering a week-long illness, most of us would just accept it, as we do with the normal winter flu. But we cannot be sure the health system will be able to care for the old and the vulnerable. And because this is a new bug, we do not know what it can do. Can it mutate? Can it carry more serious illnesses?

In Scotland, we have 266 cases and three deaths (at the time of writing), so we are just at the beginning of the coronavirus cycle. We can't be certain how high those figures will rise but it is worth noting that the death toll in China, 3,200, is still less than half the number of flu deaths we have each year in

Britain. And in
China the epidemic appears to be coming to an end after three months.

But First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has joined all the other political leaders and the world's media in speaking in apocalyptic tones about Covid 19. All talk of a second referendum this year on Scottish independence has been dropped. Instead, there is a war-time appeal for unity and a sense that our whole society is being tested, including our political leaders.



Princes Street, quiet but not deserted. Scotland stunned but stoic.

Announcing the closure of schools this week Ms Sturgeon said: "It was one of the hardest decisions I have had to take as First Minister."

It has certainly ramped up the sense of crisis. In interview after interview she has repeated the line: "We are heading into stormy waters, but as First Minister, I will do everything I can to steer the ship safely through."

So, normal school is to stop
for the foreseeable future. Only specially vulnerable pupils and those with
parents in "essential" occupations will be accommodated in
"education
hubs". Otherwise, teachers will send
pupils homework over the internet. All
exams are to be cancelled, and instead results will be awarded
by the national
exam board, the SQA, on the basis of prelim results, course
work and teachers'
assessments.

It's the first time since the
Scottish exam system was established in 1888 that school exams

have not been held. Scotland's universities and colleges have also abandoned face-to-face teaching and several have announced there will be no exams this year.

The NHS has been put on red alert. All non-urgent operations have been cancelled. Over 3,000 beds have been freed up for coronavirus patients. Medical students and recently retired staff are being drafted in to help. 700 more ventilator machines have been ordered and more safety equipment for ambulance staff. Testing capacity is to be increased.

All professional football and rugby matches have been cancelled. Churches, cinemas and concert halls have closed. The Edinburgh Science Festival at Easter has been called off, so too has the Film Festival in July. The main Edinburgh Festival postponed its programme launch this week, though the festival itself is still due to go ahead as normal in August.

Hotels, pubs and restaurants are still open, though like many businesses, they are suffering from lack of customers and staff sickness or "self-isolation". The Scottish Government is passing on the £1.9bn in loans to businesses announced by the UK Chancellor earlier this week. The mortgage holiday and rent support measures also apply in Scotland.

All four governments in the UK are urging us to wash our hands frequently, self-isolate if we have a cough or fever, avoid all unnecessary travel, work from home if possible, refrain from panic buying. And the over 70s are being told to reduce their "social contact".

All this for weeks, if not months. It's a big ask. And I wonder if it can be sustained. My local supermarket was crowded this morning for the "over 70s hour" between 7.30am and 8.30am. And a good deal of panic buying was taking place.

Later, in the centre of Edinburgh, the streets were quiet but

not deserted. My local community centre, at first stunned into closure, is now beginning to plan how it can again reach out and help the community with food deliveries and other social services.

No doubt, over time, social media and phone networks will set up virtual neighbourhoods. This indeed is a test of our ingenuity and social strength. But we are finding means of staying in touch and offering companionship through this unexpected and surreal emergency.