

Letter from Scotland

My local community centre has locked itself down as a community kitchen and is distributing food parcels to the needy in our part of town.

Each day it is delivering 130 paper bags containing a breakfast, a light lunch, an afternoon snack and a cooked evening meal to be heated up in an oven or microwave.

It is just one of the voluntary schemes which have sprung up all over Scotland to help the vulnerable through the coronavirus emergency. We are drawing on the nation's "social capital" to see us through this crisis.

The all too familiar term "social distancing" is a misnomer. The two metre rule is physical distancing, and it is being religiously observed. But, thank goodness we are not practising social distancing. In fact, our social bonds are even stronger now, as individuals and communities rally round to help each other.

Within two days of the Scottish Government launching its appeal for [volunteers](#) to help in the health service and in community support, 41,000 people had signed on. At 8.00pm on Thursday night, people stood at their doors and windows to applaud all those helping us through these frightening times – NHS staff, all the emergency services, care home nurses, super-market staff, lorry drivers, people working in food processing factories, farmers...anyone in the long chain of essential workers needed to keep us fed, healthy and safe.

Each day Nicola Sturgeon gives us a First Ministerial

briefing, with its grim statistics and its stern message to stay at home.

The death toll has now exceeded 100 (it was 126 at the time of writing). Some 3,000 beds have been set aside in NHS hospitals for Covid-19 patients. A temporary NHS hospital is being set up in the Scottish Events Campus in Glasgow with a capacity for up to 1,000 patients. Most cancer screening has been suspended to free up staff and laboratory space for Covid-19 testing. And the number of tests is being increased from 1,900 a day to 3,500, largely for NHS patients and staff, though the whole testing issue is being much debated. So too is the shortage of protective equipment for front line staff.



Feeding a fearful nation

Meanwhile the stay-at-home policy has plunged the economy into meltdown. The Scottish Chamber of Commerce is speaking of “catastrophe” as 40 per cent of businesses report a 90-100 per cent fall in income. Half will only have enough cash to see them through the next three months at best. Leaders of the horticultural industry say they are facing losing a huge proportion of their sales, just as the spring gardening season is getting under way.



Virgin Money Fireworks 2019 – Edinburgh International Festival. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com
The cancellation of the [Edinburgh Festivals](#) this summer will cost Edinburgh £300m in lost income. The postponement of the UN’s world conference on climate change, which was due in November, will hit Glasgow businesses hard – not to mention the fight against climate change. The Fraser of Allander Institute is warning that this will all be much worse than the

recession caused by the banking crash in 2008 and it will take us much longer to climb back.

Yet while the economy and the NHS were involved in this life or death struggle, the Scottish Parliament was fighting over the finer points of trial by jury. They were debating the emergency legislation being brought in to cope with the crisis, which among its many temporary provisions, was the suspension of jury trials. Instead, judges would sit alone, which seems to me to a reasonable compromise in the circumstances.



Holyrood. First Minister Statement: COVID-19. Scottish Parliament Holyrood Edinburgh. Wednesday 1 April 2020 PHOTO Fraser Bremner

In the end, the government had to drop that section of the bill in order to get the more important provisions through. These include a ban on home evictions for the next six months and the early release of prisoners serving short sentences to relieve the pressure on our over-crowded jails. The Scottish Government has also had to postpone its flagship policy of

free full-week childcare for all 3 and 4 year olds and some 2 year olds. It was due to come into effect this summer, though there were already doubts about its viability.

In short, the coronavirus emergency has turned our world upside down.

The price we are paying – economically and socially – to protect the old and vulnerable is enormous. And, as someone approaching 70, I am all too conscious of the sacrifice the younger generations are making in order to save those of us infected from a horrible death – 6.4 per cent, according to a study of the Chinese experience published in The Lancet.

I only hope that in the New World born of this disease that we older folk, those of us with a reasonable income, repay the debt we owe by taking a cut in our pensions and an increase in our taxes.

As the First Minister says, we are in this together.