

# Letter from Scotland

There was to have been a grand parade and an outdoor concert in Princes Street Gardens. There was to have been a national service of remembrance. There was to have been street parties.

But we are involved in a different struggle from the one that finally came to an end in Europe 75 years ago today. Instead the British Legion is broadcasting a virtual service and the only parades are round our own gardens.

But there is a war-time spirit in the air, with a special address by HM The Queen, [minutes of silence and daily briefings by ministers](#), north and south of the boarder. There are lists of casualties, orders to be followed, volunteers distributing food parcels, the issuing of face-coverings (not quite gas masks) and every citizen urged to play his or her part in the national struggle for survival.

Britain stands alone again, as the worst affected country in Europe for the coronavirus. Over 30,000 people are dead. In Scotland nearly 3,000. And last week nearly 60 per cent were in nursing homes. The far flung Highlands were thought to be safe from Covid-19 and then 57 cases were reported in a care home in Portree on the Isle of Skye. Both residents and staff were affected. Five of the residents have already died.

But the death rate is falling and hospitals are no longer in danger of being overwhelmed. So maybe, to echo a war time expression, we are at the end of the beginning. First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has been outlining her exit strategy, though she is stressing it's not to be implemented

yet.



Lest we forget, in our present troubles. Photo by Alan Wilson. Scotland, she says is still not far enough below the crucial reproduction rate of 1:1. We're "hovering around 1" apparently. This is probably higher than in England where the time-line of the outbreak is about a week or a fortnight ahead of Scotland. It's led to speculation that Scotland may follow a different and slower route out of the lockdown than England. "I will not be pressurised into making changes too early," Ms Sturgeon warned the UK Government.

The exit plan, for what it's worth at this stage, is first for a change in the stay-at-home rules to allow people to take a walk twice a day instead of just once. Then schools, shops, factories, offices and building sites might be re-opened provided they observe the two-metre distancing rule. At the same time a programme of "test, trace and isolate" would begin.

Testing capacity has now been stepped up to 8,000 a day and will soon go up to 15,000. The Labour Party is calling for all staff and residents in care homes to be tested in the next fortnight...that's 85,000 people. Testing would be followed up by some 2,000 "tracers" who would advise those who have been in close contact with anyone infected to isolate themselves for 14 days. A big ask. But not as big an ask, in my view at least, as the introduction of a smart-phone app, warning people automatically that they should go into isolation. That's still under consideration.

All of this, of course, is to get people back to work and rescue the economy from collapse. And indeed to prevent deaths from non-Covid causes. This week

the Institute for Public Policy Research estimated that up to 150,000 people in Scotland could lose their jobs completely. The numbers being "furloughed" on the government's wage subsidy scheme could rise to 750,000. It suggests a "universal basic income" should be introduced to sustain the economy in the long run.

Every day the Scottish Government seems to eak out more money for specially hard hit sectors of society. But it is all on a small scale compared with the needs. Home carers are to get a one-off bonus of £230 in June. Small businesses will share a grant scheme of £120m. The universities will get £75m. Will visitor attractions be next I wonder? The association representing 450 different sites says nearly half of them will struggle to survive over the next three months.

Those on the political right, like the former Chancellor George Osborne, are beginning to worry about us becoming too dependent on the state. They point to government debt this year going up to £300bn, six times the pre-Covid level. This is driving the government's share of the economy up from the usual 40 per cent to near war-time levels of over 60 per cent.

But the VE Day anniversary reminds us that we are in another life and death struggle, this time against an enemy we cannot see. How appropriate for this increasingly virtual world. We are realising too that if we are to reach a victory day over Covid-19, we need to make a collective effort, government and people working together.



8th May 2020 Edinburgh – Two RAF Typhoon jets fly over Edinburgh to mark VE Day. PHOTO Live Edinburgh News