

Letter from Scotland

This has been the week when the four nations of the United Kingdom each took their own route out of the coronavirus maze.

It has caused a little confusion and some political distress. But it can mostly be explained by the possibility that the “R number”, the reproduction rate, might be different in different parts of these islands.

Scotland was a week or so later into the Covid-19 epidemic than England. We also have an older population and more poor communities. Taken together, the experts estimate that the R number is between 0.7 and 1, and probably nearer 1, which means the number of people being infected is neither rising nor falling. So Nicola Sturgeon has told us we must continue to “Stay Home” while the slogan in England has been downgraded to “Stay Alert”.



The parting of the ways
While the English are being
urged to return to work and can play golf, visit garden centres and look forward to schools re-opening in June, we are still confined to barracks. We are however allowed out of our houses more than just once a day to stretch our legs and take the air.

Everything depends on the casualty rate. This week, we've continued to make positive progress. There have been 110

fewer deaths than last week but the total in Scotland now stands at over 3,000. Again, most casualties were in nursing homes (57 per cent) and over 90 per cent had at least one underlying health problem. What was new in the statistics this week was the finding that people living in deprived areas were 2.3 times more likely to die from Covid-19 than those in rich areas. Hardly a surprise, but shaming to have it confirmed.

The belated realisation that the real battle against the disease is in our nursing homes has dominated the news headlines this week. An NHS rescue team has had to be sent in to Home Farm care home in Portree on the Isle of Skye where there have been seven deaths and where 59 residents and staff have tested positive for Covid-19. And at the Highgate home in Uddingston, where 22 residents have died, questions are being asked by both Labour and Conservative leaders as why it appears that none of the staff were tested for the virus.

Ms Sturgeon has also faced questions as to why a Covid-19 outbreak at a Nike sportswear conference in Edinburgh back in February was kept quiet. She said everyone at the conference was traced but, because of patient confidentiality, no public announcement was made.

Overall, it's been a tough week for the First Minister, having to explain faults in the testing system and defend her stricter lockdown in Scotland. "There isn't an hour goes by when I don't question myself," she told MSPs. "I agonise over the decisions we are taking, to make sure we're learning as we go and getting these decisions as right as possible."

Meanwhile, more horror stories are emerging about the state of the economy. Official figures show that national income fell by 6 per cent in March – that includes only one week of lockdown. The Federation of Small Businesses in Scotland said a third of its members may have to close down for good as a result of Covid-19. The universities are in financial trouble because of the likely loss of high-paying foreign students.

And the plight of the tourism industry was thrown into sharp relief when even The National Trust for Scotland had to announce it may have to shed 400 jobs and sell some of its properties, one of which is Bute House, the First Minister's official residence.



Bute House. Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

In the depths of recession it's hard, but essential, to think how we might climb out of it. The Chancellor Rishi Sunak has certainly been thinking about it. His extension of the job retention scheme till October, costing a colossal £14bn a month, will no doubt keep some of the economy alive. But I wonder how much things will change in the future. Will we work more from home, or near home? Will we buy more locally, and be prepared to pay more for it? Will we holiday abroad? I, for one, hope there will be huge changes to our economy, and our society, for the better.

There are hopeful habits developing. I've never seen the streets and parks so full of people walking and cycling. We've learned the importance of good public services.

Volunteers have turned community centres into food distribution centres for the poor. Fund raising events for the NHS and care services have sprung up like spring flowers. The Edinburgh runner Olivia Strong has now raised £5m from her Run for Heroes campaign. And 90-year old Margaret Payne is half way through the ascent of her stair mountain in Sutherland and has already raised over £300,000.

My fear, though, is fear itself. We've all become a little paranoid, frightened and suspicious of each other. When the end of lockdown comes, we have to be brave and rediscover our humanity. Soon we will be able to look back at Covid-19 as just another epidemic, like bird flu or foot-and-mouth, or Ebola or Sars. And next time, be a bit more prepared.