

Letter from Scotland

Scotland will be the last country in Europe to come out of “lockdown”, if all goes well in the next few days. Our cautious First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has, at last, given us details of her “route map” to a brighter future, but it is still all dependent on the continued downward trend of the coronavirus figures.

The stated reason for her caution is that Scotland is about a fortnight behind the rest of the UK in the progress of the virus. It arrived here later and thus our reinfection rate is still higher than that in England, although it is below 1.

But I would add other reasons.

We have the highest obesity rate in Europe. We have an elderly population. We have pockets of extreme poverty. And rather surprisingly, there hasn't been the same pressure on the government here to get the economy going again. So much for the supposed Scottish work ethic.



Route-map out of Lockdown

So, with the death rate continuing to fall (it's down by 83 this week to a total of 3,546) it looks like we will be able to take our first steps on the route map to freedom. From the beginning of June we'll be allowed to meet up with other people from another household, but only outdoors and at two metres distant. Construction sites will re-open, so too will recycling centres and garden centres. We will be allowed to

play golf, tennis and bowling and go fishing. Take-away cafes will re-open. And you can play croquet.

But schools, colleges and universities will not reopen till after the summer holidays. Hotels, restaurants, churches and theatres will remain closed and large gatherings will continue to be banned.

Meanwhile, the “test, trace and isolate” offensive will be stepped up, and will be called Test and Protect. Testing has been widened to include all staff and residents in care homes and 600 “tracers” are on standby to track down those who have come into contact with Covid-infected people.

The tracing system however has already been questioned after it emerged that there was a Covid-19 outbreak at an Edinburgh hotel in late February and the public was not told. At first Nicola Sturgeon said the reason was because of “patient confidentiality” but this week she more or less admitted to MSPs that, in hindsight, that may have been a mistake. I guess she’s told the tracers that it must not happen again.

On Wednesday the Scottish parliament passed the government’s emergency Coronavirus legislation which will allow health boards to take over failing care homes such as Home Farm on Skye where 10 residents have now died. It also clears the way for special one-off payments of £230 to Scotland’s 83,000 unpaid home carers.

The lockdown has been particularly hard to stick to this week because we are watching other countries opening up across Europe, and because the weather has been so wonderful, at least for most of the week. We’ve had blue skies, mild winds and rising temperatures. Wednesday was the warmest day of the year so far. The temperature in Aviemore reached 24 degrees. People flocked to the parks and beaches – keeping their social

distance, of course.

It was as if we are trying to ignore the economic tsunami that is coming. Unemployment has already risen to 113,000 in Scotland or over 4 per cent and we're told it is heading for 10 per cent when the government's job support scheme comes to an end in October. 188,000 people are claiming welfare benefits. Almost half of Scottish businesses have told the Chamber of Commerce they may not survive the recession. The Scottish Tourism Alliance says 2,500 businesses may collapse if there's no re-opening this summer. The aero-engine manufacturer Rolls-Royce is the latest company to announce job cuts. Up to 1,300 jobs could go at its factory in Renfrewshire.

And then there's the plight of our football clubs....no games and no ticket sales for the foreseeable future. After weeks of anguish, the premier league clubs have finally voted to end the season as it stands, which means jubilation for Celtic – who've now won the league 9 times in a row – and despair for Hearts, Partick Thistle and Stranraer who are due for relegation to the lower Championship league. Unless, that is, there is "reconstruction" – a larger league, at least for the next year.

It all makes me want to take off for another planet. This week saw the test launch of Britain's first space rocket for 50 years by Edinburgh firm, Skyrora. The engines on the Skylark-L 11 metre rocket were started up at a temporary

launch site at Kildermorie near Alness on the Cromarty Firth.

Alas, the rocket didn't get off the ground. But that was on purpose because this is only a test for the real thing which is scheduled for the spring of next year. Three sites in Scotland are bidding to become permanent "space ports" – in Sutherland, Shetland and North Uist.

By then we may all want to
fly off to a brave new world and start again.