

Letter from Scotland

For a whole week now, our garden centres have been open. So too are our golf courses and tennis courts.

We've been able to meet a friend for a walk in the local park and even sunbathe on the beach. We've also been enjoying a heatwave. We've had the sunniest month of May since 1955.

But, of course, this is Scotland so our weather has quickly returned to normal and our gardens are now getting a good watering and a cooling breeze.

Nicola Sturgeon is now casting her first ministerial eye over the Covid-19 figures to see if the virus takes advantage of the easing of the lockdown. We won't know for another week or two but all the graphs are heading downwards as I write. The number of daily deaths has dropped into single figures for the first time since the outbreak began. The overall total now stands at 3,981.



How does your garden grow ?

It's emerged though that the number of deaths in nursing homes now exceeds the deaths in hospitals. And therein lies the rub. It reveals how blind we all were to the plight of the nursing homes at the start of this crisis. The opposition parties this week have been asking tough questions about the lack of testing in nursing homes.

Why have all staff and residents not been tested already? There's capacity for 15,000 tests a day but only 5,000 are being carried out. The health secretary Jeane Freeman says local health boards are still setting up their testing systems and the parallel test centres set up by the Army are not yet local enough to be within easy reach of every nursing home.

There are still awkward questions being asked about the decision to discharge elderly patients from hospitals at the beginning of the crisis into nursing homes, without being tested. And there are questions over increases in pay for care

workers which have not yet materialised, despite being promised two months ago.

For Nicola Sturgeon, the answer is: we're doing our best, please be patient. So the general lockdown goes on, with schools and non-essential businesses closed and outings limited to 5 miles. And all until the infection rate comes down further. This week it's down slightly to between 0.7 and 0.9.

Last weekend she warned us not to flock to the beaches or indulge in large family barbecues and most people stuck to the rules. But the police had to issue "dispersal orders" to over 800 people last Saturday, five times the number of the Saturday before. She said she would not hesitate to re-introduce a complete lockdown, with full police powers, if the virus looks like getting out of control again.

Meanwhile the damage to the economy gets worse. The Scottish Tourism Alliance, representing 25 major tourist organisations, has warned that most businesses are not viable and will not re-open under the two metre distancing rule. They say the World Health Organisation and many other countries are satisfied it can safely be reduced to one metre. But there's been no hint from the government that there will be any relaxation soon. The Restaurant Group has announced it's closing four of its premises in Edinburgh and the Intercontinental Hotels Group is cutting staff at five of its top hotels in Scotland.

Then on Wednesday came the news that Rolls Royce is to lay off 700 staff, half its workforce, at its aero-engine factory at Inchinnan in Renfrewshire. It's feared it's the first of many permanent job losses in the airline industry and in Scotland's oil and gas industry. It's led to calls for government bailouts and the Scottish government is dispersing £2.3bn to help firms get through the pandemic.

But if we are serious about re-setting the economy and heading for a greener future, none of these high carbon industries should be bailed out. Unless, of course they can re-orient themselves, Rolls Royce to produce wind turbines or electric engines and the oil industry to off-shore wind and carbon capture.

Remember Brexit? This is the crucial month for the big Boris trade deal with Brussels and it looks like the price of fish will have a lot to do with it. The Scottish fishing industry is worried that free access to North Sea fishing grounds will have to be conceded to get any deal through. And the SNP and Labour parties are calling for an extension of the one-year transition period. The Scottish Government's chief economist has warned there will be a further 2 per cent fall in national income if Brexit goes ahead in December.



Black Lives Matter peaceful protest at St Giles 3 June 2020
PHOTO Live Edinburgh News

The fallout from the George Floyd demonstrations sweeping America has reached Scotland. Anti-racism campaigners in Edinburgh went down on one knee in The Royal Mile on Wednesday and other demonstrations are planned this weekend in several Scottish cities including Edinburgh. But as we point the finger at Donald Trump's America, let's not forget we have a little unfinished business here at home. The Floyd case has echoes of Sheku Bayoh's death in police custody in Kirkcaldy in 2015. A public inquiry is about to get under way.



Black Lives Matter at the US Consulate Edinburgh Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

Finally, there are at least some brighter aspects of the Lockdown. More of us are walking and cycling, our gardens are looking tidy and our wildlife is having a whale of a time. A mural has just been painted on a wall in Leith depicting a group of animals – a monkey, a tiger, a tortoise, a rhinoceros, a polar bear – all looking delighted and holding up placards saying: “long live the lockdown” and “bats rule” and “keep the humans locked up.” It’s signed “The Rebel Bear.”