

# Letter from Scotland

**We're into phase two of the Scottish government's slow road out of Lockdown. Despite our Covid-19 figures falling for the seventh consecutive week, Scotland is still taking the most cautious approach to restarting normal life of any country in Europe.**

**That's because we've have one of the highest death rates and we were one of the last countries to be infected.**

So on Thursday, Nicola Sturgeon announced that shops, factories, warehouses, laboratories will have to wait another week to reopen. Face coverings will be mandatory on all public transport. And the two metre distancing rule will remain in place for at least the next fortnight. So too will the five mile travel restriction for leisure and exercise purposes.

Among the few freedoms she is allowing is for people who live alone to be able to form a "bubble" with one other household (an 'extended household'). In particular, this will allow a grandparent to visit a son or daughter's house to help look after the children. A clever rule change this, because it helps to solve the isolation problem and the home-schooling problem all at once and it allows the parents to go back to work. Other slight easing of restrictions include being able to meet outdoors with two other households, not just one, and vulnerable people who have been "shielding" (staying inside for the last three months) will be allowed out for exercise at

quiet times of the day.

There is still no time-table for pubs and restaurants re-opening and the holiday and tourism business will have to wait till 15<sup>th</sup> July at the earliest.

So. as expected, the economic figures have been shocking. National income is estimated to have fallen by nearly 19 per cent in April. 800,000 Scots are still on furlough, under the UK government's job retention scheme. There are almost daily warnings of permanent job losses. Unemployment is already at 4.6 per cent and is expected to grow to nearly 10 per cent. According to one report this week, the old coalfield communities are going to suffer most, yet again.

The Scottish Government has faced a rising tide of criticism over the slow return to schooling. At one point the Education Secretary John Swinney warned that part-time schooling (they call it blended learning) might continue for a whole year. But Nicola Sturgeon was quickly forced to row back on that and promise that full time education would be reinstated "as soon as it is safe to do so." Some councils, like Edinburgh, were talking of children only being in the classroom one day a week when the schools reopen in August. The problem is the government's insistence on the two metre distancing rule which limits the number of pupils in each classroom.



Edinburgh City Chambers. Photo: Martin P. McAdam  
[www.martinmcadam.com](http://www.martinmcadam.com)

The local councils are saying that they can only hire extra accommodation in church and village halls and pay for more teachers and classroom assistants, if the central government provides extra funds. It's not clear if this will be forthcoming, though it would be a good way to create jobs at a time of high unemployment. This may be the opportunity we've been waiting for to reduce class sizes and improve our education system.

It's just one example of how we might build a better world as we come out of the coronavirus crisis. Another, much talked about, is the green revolution. We had a reminder this week that the problem of climate change has not gone away. Figures on Scotland's greenhouse gas emissions for 2018 show an increase of 1.5 per cent. It means we've missed our target, for the second year in a row, of a 54 per cent cut since 1990.



fbpic- Nicola Sturgeon MSP First Minister announces further changes to the Scottish government Covid-19 lockdown at the Scottish Parliament Holyrood Edinburgh. Picture FRASER BREMNER The Environment Secretary, Roseanna Cunningham, blamed the cold “Beast of the East” in early 2018 which forced people to turn up their gas-fired central heating. The Green Party’s Patrick Harvie told Nicola Sturgeon at First Minister’s Question Time that she needs to do much more to reduce emissions from transport, particularly air transport, as we move out of lockdown.

The brittle atmosphere of the lockdown has again resulted in trouble on the streets of Glasgow. Last weekend’s demonstrations, for and against keeping the statues of slave traders, were repeated on Wednesday, this time over the issue of refugees. A peaceful march calling for better treatment for refugees and asylum seekers was “hijacked” by gangs of far-right demonstrators and known football hooligans. The police had to intervene in large numbers to separate the two groups.

We are living in volatile times. Tempers are wearing thin.



Our troubles seem daunting. I have just passed my 70<sup>th</sup> birthday and I'm not proud of the world my generation has allowed to evolve. I only hope the road out of lockdown is better than the road into it.



The road out of Lockdown