

Letter from Scotland

A change of direction. Captain Sturgeon has ordered a sharp alteration of course, saying the coronavirus wind has veered and is now blowing HMS Scotland out of the lockdown doldrums. Schools will re-open in August for full-time education for all pupils.

At various points in July, all shops, factories, building sites, pubs and cafes, dentists, hairdressers and holiday businesses can re-open. The 5 mile restriction on travel will go and people from more than one household will be able to meet, outside, in extended groups. Even visits to nursing homes are to be allowed, under strict conditions.

But she warned that Covid-19 had not gone away, it would be "back in a flash" if we don't keep to the hygiene rules...washing hands, cleaning surfaces, wearing a face covering in enclosed spaces and staying two metres apart. On this last point, however, she might be prepared to follow England down to one-metre, if the virus figures continue to decline.

So far, the news is good. The weekly death toll has again fallen (it stands at a three-month total of 4,119). And the estimate for the number of people infected is just 2,400,

tantalisingly close to “elimination.” If the “Test and Protect” system is robust enough, we might be able to fight the virus one local outbreak at a time.



Back to work. Liberton Primary School in Edinburgh, damaged by fire, being prepared for the return of pupils on 11th August. The tipping point came on Tuesday, just after Boris Johnson’s “end of hibernation speech” in which he announced the easing of the two-metre distancing rule to one metre in England. Here, the Education Secretary, John Swinney, told MSPs he had reconsidered his “blended” scheme for re-starting schools in August – in which pupils would only attend for one or two days a week – and he was now calling on councils to reopen schools for all pupils five days a week and abandon the two metre distancing rule for children.



John Swinney MSP Deputy First Minister and Education Secretary
Ministerial Statement: Update on Education Recovery 23 June
2020 at the Covid-19 social distancing Scottish Parliament,
Holyrood Edinburgh. Picture FRASER BREMNER (date
taken)23.06.2020(digital image) tel 07976 414 878 email
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The next day, Ms Sturgeon went further, announcing a swift

timetable for the return to work in July and saying she was re-considering the two-metre rule in Scotland. So, about a fortnight after England, Scotland will be re-opening most of its economy. Only football stadiums, theatres, concerts, church services, night-clubs and other large gatherings remain banned.

For business, the change of course could not come too soon, though they say if the two-metre rule remains, many businesses will not be viable. The economic think tank the Fraser of Allander Institute said this week: "The Scottish economy is in its deepest recession in living memory", relying on £10bn worth of government support to stay afloat.

Step forward a man with a plan. Benny Higgins, the former head of Tesco Bank, is chairman of the Scottish government's advisory group on economic recovery. His group has published a 25 point plan which includes the government taking shares in struggling companies, a job guarantee for all 16-25 year olds, public and private investment in digital and creative industries and for the Scottish government's borrowing capacity to be increased. The whole plan would cost £6bn but without it, the group warn, the economy will not climb back to pre-recession levels till 2023.

We're now waiting for the government's response. Already the Scottish Finance Secretary Kate Forbes has [written](#) to the Treasury in London asking for permission to borrow £500m to meet the immediate cost of the Covid crisis. Our 32 local councils, for instance, say they have a looming £400m hole in their budgets due to loss of income and extra costs.

In the midst of this national tragedy, another, private, tragedy hit us this week- the loss of three young children in a fire in a flat in Paisley. Their mother was taken to hospital badly injured. Their father touched all our hearts which his Facebook tribute to his "three little angels." The children's schools, their local church and neighbours all

rallied round to lay flowers and recall their brief lives. An on-line fund-raiser quickly doubled its target.

It was another sign that human sympathy has not died under the pandemic, indeed it may have been strengthened. And here's a fine example -the Highland granny I mentioned at the beginning of the Lockdown, Margaret Payne (90) has raised £400,000 for the NHS and a local hospice. Her target had been £10,000 when she started climbing the staircase in her home in Ardvar in Sutherland 73 days before.

Despite a bad hip and two knee replacements, she climbed the stairs 282 times, a total of 2,398ft, the same ascent as one of her favourite mountains when she was young, Suilven. Well done to her and all who donated.