

Letter from Scotland

Nicola Sturgeon says we have taken our biggest step so far into the “new normal”.

From this week we’ve been allowed to eat and drink in pubs and restaurants, stay in a hotel or on a campsite, visit friends and family overnight, go to church or mosque and get a haircut.

Social distancing for children has been abandoned, allowing nurseries and children’s sports clubs to re-open. And, until yesterday, we had a whole week with no confirmed Covid-19 deaths.

“But the virus is still out there,” Ms Sturgeon keeps warning us at the daily Scottish Government briefing. (The death toll stands at 4,187.) And the public seem to be taking the warning seriously. Face coverings are now the norm in shops, even in large airy supermarkets. It was remarkable how quickly we all began wearing them as soon as it became compulsory last Friday.



Eating out in a plastic bag..the new normal.

There is an air of being on holiday, of flying on butterfly wings out of the chrysalis of lockdown. Schoolchildren are out on their bikes. Workers on furlough are in the parks enjoying the summer weather. Businesses and public organisations are either closed or open for emergencies only, their websites as inscrutable as ever.

But we all know it’s the calm before the storm. Big rises in unemployment are coming our way. We learned this week that the economy suffered a 19 per cent drop in April and only

crawled back by 1.8 per cent in May. A third of the Scottish workforce are on the UK government's "furlough" job retention scheme – which ends in October. The official unemployment figure has already risen to 4.3 per cent and may rise to 14 per cent by the winter, according to the Office of Budget Responsibility, the biggest annual fall for 300 years.

Then next year we face the headwinds of Brexit. The SNP staged a last appeal for a postponement in a special debate at Westminster on Wednesday but they were accused of dividing the UK and undermining the nations' confidence. And there have been other disagreements this week, over immigration and the powers that will be returning to Britain from Brussels.

The UK Home Secretary, Priti Patel's, new points-based immigration policy did not go down well in Scotland. The Holyrood government is insisting on a separate visa system for Scotland where there is a desperate need for EU workers in our health and care services, in tourism and in the fruit farming industry. And on the 111 powers returning from Brussels, the Scottish Government fears Westminster will stage a "power grab" under the guise of establishing an "internal market" in Britain. It says Scottish farmers, for instance, will face competition from cheap and less regulated products from America.

All this, alongside the differences over the handling of Covid-19, has led to rising support for the SNP in the opinion polls and impatience among SNP members for independence and a chance to re-join the EU as an independent Scotland. One prominent SNP member David Thompson has left the party to form a new Alliance for Independence. He says he doesn't want to undermine the SNP and will only put up candidates in the elections next spring on the regional lists. That, he says, will allow more independence-minded MSPs to be elected to Holyrood, giving them a majority to call a referendum and lead the nation to independence.

Ms Sturgeon dismisses such machinations as matters for the distant future. Right now, she is totally focused on winning the war against the virus. She's going for "elimination" and the "prize" of a total return to full schooling on 11 August. If that works out, and there is no resurgence of the virus, we are into "Phase 4" and the "new normal."

Undoubtedly the best Covid story of the week concerns the Scottish airline pilot Stephen Cameron. He was flown home from Vietnam after spending 65 days on a life support machine. He was working for Vietnam Airlines in March when he became ill from Covid-19. He was known as Patient 91 because he was the 91st person to be admitted into hospital in Vietnam suffering from the virus.

And he was the last such patient to be discharged, keeping Vietnam's record of having no Covid-19 deaths. He says, at one point, his lungs suffered 90 per cent damage but he's now well on the way to recovery and says he's overwhelmed by the generosity of the Vietnamese people and the professionalism of the doctors and nurses who treated him.

It's a reminder that, for all our wealth and sophistication, most other countries in the world have handled the Covid crisis better than we have.