

Letter from Scotland

The coronavirus has truly scuppered our summer. The Edinburgh International Festival and its 3,000 Fringe shows should be getting under way right now.

The Olympic Games should be flooding from our TV screens.

Pilgrims should be on their way to the hajj in Mecca. Well toasted Scots should be returning un-quarantined from their holidays in Spain. And the Highlands should be ringing with the sound of cash registers as foreign visitors explore our hills and glens and wish for windy days to drive away the midges.

All that has gone. But there are some brave attempts to create a virtual summer. The Festival Fringe is “staging” a video variety show every Friday evening, charging £9 a ticket to raise money for the Fringe’s on-going costs. The singer Jamie MacDougall has just recorded a video tribute to Sir Harry Lauder to mark the 150th anniversary of the tartan showman’s birth.

[The Edinburgh International Book Festival](#) will take place virtually, and watch this space for exciting news on Monday about other cultural events.



Director of Edinburgh International Book Festival Nick Barley in Charlotte Square to launch the 2020 festival PHOTO John Preece

And professional football begins its “new normal” season this weekend, with empty stadiums. Apparently the Celtic v Hamilton match will have “piped” crowd sounds played over the

loud-speaker system to give players the virtual experience of the cheers and boos that inspire them to great things. Missing from the premier league this season will be Heart of Midlothian who, after a court battle and an independent tribunal, have lost their argument that they would have avoided relegation to the lower Championship league if the season had not been interrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic.



Where's the band? Where's the crowd? Where's the fun?
On Covid-19 review day, Thursday, the First Minister was sufficiently pleased with our progress towards "elimination" to award us two major prizes. Nicola Sturgeon confirmed that all schools would be open for full-time education from 11 August. She also confirmed funding for an extra 1,400 teachers and 200 support staff. Meanwhile, the 180,000 people who have been "shielding" at home for the last four months can at last return to "normal" life, with the same freedoms and rules as the rest of us. It's estimated that only 300 people throughout Scotland are infected with the virus and the re-infection rate is well below 1:1.

We have had no confirmed Covid-19 deaths in Scotland for the last two weeks. And the total number of Covid-19 deaths (confirmed and suspected) has risen by 8 in the last week to 4,201. However we have had another "spike", this time involving a pharmacy and an Amazon distribution centre in Inverclyde. A total of eight cases are involved and it's not clear, at time of writing, whether they are connected.

At First Minister's Question Time in The Scottish Parliament, the Conservative leader Jackson Carlaw questioned Nicola Sturgeon's claim that Scotland's coronavirus rate was five times lower than England's – the so-called 'prevalence'. He said the national Office of Statistics could not verify the claim and it was therefore misleading. Ms Sturgeon pointed out that in the past month, there had been over 2,000 confirmed Covid-19 deaths in England but only 9 in Scotland.

The strange thing about this rather heated political exchange is that Mr Carlaw gave no hint of the surprise he was about to spring on us all an hour or two later. He is resigning as Scottish Conservative leader, only five months after winning the leadership election. He explained that he'd realised over those five months that the Conservatives needed a younger person to lead them into the Scottish elections in May next year. I wonder if he means someone less willing to put up with Boris Johnson and his brand of breezy Brexit Conservatism.



POOLED IMAGES

Edinburgh, Scotland, UK. 30 July 2020

Pictured: Jackson Carlaw MSP – Leader of the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.

Nicola Sturgeon MSP – First Minister of Scotland and Leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) giving a ministerial statement: COVID 19 Next Steps.

Credit: Colin Fisher/Alamy Live news/SP Pool.

The Scottish Government is less breezy and certainly more cautious than the UK Government over emerging from lockdown. Having given the schools and the shielding group permission to enter the new normal, Ms Sturgeon made it clear that Phase 4 of the route map would have to wait till there was proof the virus was still on the way down. “We must not drop our guard now,” she said. So open air concerts, funfairs and large sports events, including Highland Games, will probably have to wait till at least 24 August and stadiums, gyms, swimming pools and theatres will have to wait till 14 September. And all is subject to change.

Meanwhile, out in the economy, things are getting worse. The latest survey from the Fraser of Allander Institute found that half of all firms who've been using the UK government's “furlough” jobs support scheme, are expected to shed staff as the scheme comes to an end in October. The Scottish Retail Consortium says shops have lost £1.9bn of business so far

during the pandemic. And this week the bus builders Alexander Dennis became the latest major manufacturer to announce job losses. Up to 650 jobs are at risk at the Falkirk works.

My heart goes out to those just entering the jobs market. Over the last few days, my newspaper has run pages and pages of names of the proud graduates who have just earned degrees from Scottish universities. What work will they find? What will become of them? We must not let the virus gnaw away at their confidence, their high spirits and their trust in the country that has brought them up. Bring on the green jobs revolution!