

Letter from Scotland

It was all going so well. But now we're sliding backwards. Covid cases are at a four-month high, there are more local outbreaks, the testing system is overloaded, there are stricter rules of engagement and rising political tensions between the four nations of our benighted United Kingdom.

There's also been a rise in the number of Covid patients in hospital and a rise in the number of deaths to a new total of 4,236, five of them in the last week. The reproduction rate has risen to 1.4. But perhaps it's all to be expected as the schools reopened, bars and restaurants began serving again, factories and building sites got back to work and the students returned.

What was not to be expected was that the testing system would let us down. The laboratories were unable to cope with the surge in demand for results as routine tests were offered to more and more people, for example, all nursing home staff. The Scottish Government pointed to the UK's "Lighthouse" laboratories as the weakest link and generously offered to take nursing home tests into its NHS laboratories. Nicola Sturgeon said this was not a criticism of the UK government but, of course, it was seen as such. Westminster politicians began to talk of the "four nations" pulling in different directions.



Twists and turns in the road

Glasgow and surrounding districts are now under a “no house visits” regime and we are all subject to a new “rule of six”. Only six people can meet for social purposes indoors or outdoors, and they must come from just two households. The old distinction of “outdoor” and “indoor” meetings as been abandoned in an effort to clamp down on our new terrace culture.

To add to the political chaos, Boris Johnson’s new Internal Market Bill has caused a special outrage in Scotland. Not only does it break international law, but the SNP see it as undermining the devolution that Scotland already has. They say we could end up having to accept GM food, American beef and chlorinated chicken and no special help can be given to Scottish industry. And on the small matter of breaking the law (the leaving treaty we already have with the European Union) Boris’s own legal adviser in Scotland, the Advocate General Lord Keen resigned.

THE RIGHT HON THE LORD KEEN OF ELIE QC

Dear Prime Minister,


It has been a privilege to serve in your Government as Advocate General for Scotland and to serve your two predecessors in the same office.

Over the past week I have found it increasingly difficult to reconcile what I consider to be my obligations as a Law Officer with your policy intentions with respect to the UKIM Bill. I have endeavoured to identify a respectable argument for the provisions at clauses 42 to 45 of the Bill but it is now clear that this will not meet your policy intentions.

In these circumstances I consider that it is my duty to tender my resignation from your Government.

Your Government faces challenges on a number of fronts and I fear that the UKIM Bill in its present form will not make these any easier.

I wish you well in dealing with these issues.

Yours sincerely,  1



On Thursday, the new UK Labour leader, Sir Keir Starmer, stepped into this quagmire on his first official visit to Keir Hardie's home country. He admitted straight away that the Labour Party has "a mountain to climb" if it's going to win

back its place as the main opposition to the SNP. But he had nothing particularly new to say, except that the “four nations” must work together to beat the virus. He had to tread carefully on Labour’s own quagmire, Richard Leonard having just seen off an attempt to unseat him as Scottish Labour leader.

In all this, you would think someone was paying attention to the economy which is fast tumbling off a cliff. National income fell by 19.4 per cent in the quarter to June and is due to keep falling when the Chancellor ends the job retention scheme at the end of October. The Scottish Government is urging him to change his mind and extend it to next summer, at least in a targeted form. Unemployment has already risen to 4.6 per cent and youth unemployment to 14.5 per cent.



Hume: Photo: Martin McAdam

No wonder the country is falling into a mood of self-doubt. Our national philosopher David Hume (1711-1776) has been called into question over his alleged support for the slave trade. Edinburgh University has removed his name from the [David Hume Tower](#), an ugly high-rise building in George Square. The gesture has caused a genteel academic row between those who’ve discovered this weakness in an obscure letter Hume wrote to his employer and in a footnote to one of his essays and those who believe Hume to be one of the gods of the Enlightenment.

From what I remember from my brief encounter with Hume at Aberdeen University in the swinging 70’s he argued that there’s a difference between “is” and “ought” and that reason is the slave (to use that word!) of the passions. Fair enough, I thought, but that still doesn’t advise us on what we should do, so it’s not really much of a philosophy. Discuss.

There is so much to discuss in these pandemic times.