

Letter from Scotland

Halloween is to be a very private affair this year. Nae guising allowed. And by All Saints Day we will be preparing for another long round of Covid-19 restrictions, based on our local council areas.

In common with most of Europe, a second wave of coronavirus is sweeping across Scotland. We are recording over a thousand new cases every day. 106 people have died in the last week, bringing the total to 4,482. But the outbreak is patchy and the figures available for each of our 32 district council areas has allowed The Scottish Government to impose five different tiers of restrictions.



Will we be pumpkins on Saturday and saints on Sunday? Photo by Denis Collette

We are waiting to see if there is any repeat of the English Civil War over which tier each council is pressed into or if there's a scramble over funding for the businesses affected. But, at least initially, the areas with fewer restrictions are the Highlands and Islands and Moray. Even here though, indoor visits to other households are not allowed and people are urged not to travel to higher risk areas. Councils in the central belt are either in tier 2 or 3, depending on their infection rate. Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee are in tier 3. Naughty Lanarkshire has only just escaped being placed in tier 4, the highest category, and will have its behaviour reviewed every day.

Nicola Sturgeon has appealed to us all to “dig in and stick with it” in the hope that the infection rate will come back under control and we can keep schools, factories and construction sites open. She told MSPs at First Minister’s Questions that there were signs that the rate of increase in infection is coming down and that the restrictions we’ve been living with for the last month are beginning to have an effect.

There was unanimous approval for the new 5-tier strategy after a parliamentary debate on Tuesday. The Conservatives, though, wanted more help for the pubs and restaurants forced to close in the worst affected areas. The government has offered £40 million and says it can’t do more unless it is granted borrowing powers from Westminster.

The Conservatives and Labour have both latched onto a report from Public Health Scotland which investigated the transfer of elderly patients out of hospitals into care homes at the very beginning of the pandemic in March and April. It found that over 3,000 patients were transferred without being tested for Covid-19 but it said there was no “statistical impact” on the number of outbreaks in nursing homes. The Conservatives said the government’s actions were irresponsible, Labour said they were reckless. But Ms Sturgeon said there was no breach of the clinical guidelines in place at the time and there was an overwhelming need to free up beds for the expected surge in coronavirus cases.

The row over nursing homes, like the questioning over the fairness of the local restrictions, are signs of what Tom Wood, the former senior police officer, has called a looming “winter of discontent”. There’s a mood in many places, he says of resentment and rebellion which will make policing difficult. In the last two months, the police have had to break up over 3,000 illegal house parties.

In a strange coincidence he’s also been recalling his role in

another winter of discontent, the miners' strike in 1984/5. This week The Scottish Government said it would bring a bill before parliament to pardon over 500 men wrongly convicted of breach of the peace offences during picket-line clashes with the police. Tom Wood was the Deputy Chief Constable in Lothian at the time and, in a long newspaper article, he says, while he doesn't quibble with granting a pardon, the real lesson of the miners' strike is that we have to learn how to manage post-industrial decline.

The Covid crisis may be about to bring about another industrial revolution, with people working from home, using transport less, visiting shops and city centres less frequently, moving towards renewable sources of energy. How we manage this transition will be crucial. We have already suffered a 9 per cent fall in national income. A report out this week from the think tank IPPR says nearly half of workers in Scotland have had their earnings cut by the pandemic. And unemployment is forecast to rise dramatically with the end, this month, of the UK government's "furlough" job subsidy scheme. And this is all before the shock of Brexit due on 1st January.

Is it too much of a cliché to say it's all going to be a disaster of "biblical proportions"? Probably, but not if you are Jim Wallace, the former Liberal Democrat leader and deputy first minister. He's just been appointed the next Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, taking up the post in May next year. He's been a kirk elder in his own parish in Orkney for 30 years and he's only the second lay person to be made Moderator in recent history. It will be interesting to see what he makes of the post-Covid revolution.



The Moderator Designate the Rt Hon Lord Wallace of Tankerness