

# Letter from Scotland

We have paused to see what the virus will do next. I sense a feeling of uneasy calm and weariness.

We are settling into our new regime of various levels of regional restrictions, with still no household visits allowed, and we are waiting to see what the dreaded Covid figures tell us.

The number of people infected has levelled off but at a fairly high rate – around 1200 a day, with around a thousand people currently in hospital. The number of deaths has reached 4,856. On Wednesday we recorded 64 deaths, the highest since early May. The Chief Medical Officer and the Royal Colleges of Medicine have warned doctors to expect “a gruelling winter” ahead.

But all of this bad news comes as scientists in Germany are celebrating a breakthrough in creating a vaccine. The Oxford and London teams are not far behind – and of course the Russians are claiming promising results from their Sputnik V vaccine. The Scottish Government has already ordered 20 deep freezes to store the vaccine at the required temperature of minus 80C and there's heady talk of starting to vaccinate the most vulnerable before Christmas.



Autumn calm before the winter storm. Mill House, Nether Liberton, Edinburgh.

Yes, government ministers are already thinking about Christmas. They are wondering if they can agree on a four-nation approach, perhaps allowing families to get together across borders. The further education minister Richard Lochhead has announced plans to offer covid tests to students so they can return home for Christmas.

A lot will depend on the success of the test and protect system which has continued to come under some tough questioning from both the Conservative and Labour opposition parties. They focused on a glitch in the counting system which the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon said has since been fixed. She insisted that 95 per cent of those testing positive have their close contacts traced and asked to isolate within 72 hours, and 80 per cent of them within 48 hours, well beyond the targets set by the World Health Organisation. Those that were not contacted, she maintained, were simply not answering their phone.

Meanwhile the virus restrictions are continuing to cause huge damage to the economy. The latest national income figures show that the bounce-back in the summer has come to a shuddering halt and that we are 8.2 per cent worse off than we were at the beginning of this year. The tourism and hospitality businesses in Fife, Perth and Angus this week have been complaining about being placed under the higher tier 3 restrictions, fearing more jobs will be lost. Gleneagles has closed for the winter. And as a sign of the times, Scot Rail is cutting 10 per cent of its services and Loganair has warned it may have to reduce its staff at Scottish airports by up to 165 posts.

Another sign is the announcement that nearly 200 jobs, a third of the workforce, are to go at the petro chemical refinery in Grangemouth owned jointly by Ineos and the Chinese state-owned

company Petro China. It's shutting down two of its plants because of a slump in demand. The Scottish government has been careful not to promise a rescue package for the company but only that it will "do everything we can to support affected employees", presumably by helping them find other work.

This has to be the way forward if we are serious about a transition to a net-zero carbon economy by 2045. The two plants at Grangemouth were spewing half a million tonnes of CO2 into the atmosphere every year. It's just a pity the government isn't doing much to create the green jobs needed to employ the 200 workers at Grangemouth. Just along the Firth of Forth, for instance, the Bi-fab oil rig yards have just lost out on a large contract to build platforms for the Neart Na Gaoithe off-shore wind farm because the Scottish government has had to withdraw its funding guarantee. Strangely this is under European Union competition rules which may not apply after the 31<sup>st</sup> December.

I'm not sure it counts as a green industry but we got news this week of a breakthrough in "bio-mining". This is being developed by the UK Centre for Astrobiology at the University of Edinburgh. Its bio-mining experiment is being flown to the International Space Station this month to study "the growth of bacteria and fungus on asteroidal material in microgravity." For science fiction enthusiasts this means using bacteria to break down rocks on the Moon or Mars to extract useful metals such as iron and magnesium or even to from soil and water for growing oxygen-producing plants. So when we've trashed this planet we can move on to somewhere else. Hummm.

Finally and at last, some good news from the football field. Scotland is through to the finals of the men's Euro 2020 tournament. It's the first time we have qualified for a major competition for 22 years. But the match in Belgrade against Serbia wasn't an easy watch. In our usual manner we played well for 88 minutes and were up 1-nil, then we let Serbia

score an equaliser. Extra time was a no-scoring shambles and only with the last kick of the penalty shootout did we win. David Marshall made a brilliant save and takes his place alongside Robert the Bruce as a national hero.

Bizarrely, in this bizarre year, Euro 2020 will take place in the summer of 2021. But at least we shall be there, if the virus will allow.