

Letter from Scotland

The dark year of 2020 dies out with a whimper, of pain, not the bang and sparkle of fireworks.

Normally I'd be walking up my local Blackford Hill to watch the Hogmanay fireworks, along with several hundred of my fellow Edinburgh citizens. This year, I'm watching a video of drone-drawn images in the sky above Highland lochs and the Forth Bridges and listening to a sad – but defiant – poem by our national Makar Jackie Kay.

Covid-19, the invisible grim reaper, has truly blighted our lives this year, not just causing illness and death (over 6,000 in Scotland) but ruining our economy and our social life. We thought we had it eliminated in the summer, but then it sprung back again in the autumn, and has now morphed into an even more contagious strain.

We are also discovering its possible long term effects.



Dark times ticking away. The Morningside clock.

As I write, the infection rate has reached a record high (over 2,000 new cases a day.) Thankfully, fewer patients are dying, as our NHS and care home heroes become more skilled at treating the disease. But still, 137 people with Covid have died in the last week. All of mainland Scotland is now in the highest Level 4 lockdown, with non-essential businesses closed and no travel allowed and no household visits – even over Hogmanay – until at least 18 January.



Deputy charge nurse Katie McIntosh administers the first of two Pfizer/BioNTech Covid-19 vaccine jabs to Clinical Lead of

Outpatient Theatres Andrew Mencnarowski, at the Western General Hospital, in Edinburgh, on the first day of the largest immunisation programme in the UK's history. Care home workers, NHS staff and people aged 80 and over began receiving the jab this morning. PA Photo. Picture date: Tuesday December 8, 2020. See PA story HEALTH Coronavirus. Photo credit : Andrew Milligan/PA Wire

But a large scale vaccination programme has begun. Over 90,000 people have already had their first injection and a second type of vaccine will begin being administered next week. The Scottish government is planning for most of us to be vaccinated by the spring.

But when we wake from this nightmare, I wonder what kind of brave new world we will find ourselves in. Will we still keep our two metre distance? Will the Chancellor's furlough scheme have kept the economy afloat? Will we have learned the lesson that our health and care services need more resources and we that really need to tackle inequality and outright poverty?

All through the year we have also suffered from the background drone of Brexit. Only on Christmas Eve was it resolved into a sad, bluesy discord. And what an insult to Christmas for Boris Johnson to call it "tidings of great joy." At the stroke of midnight we have given up on the European project. The country that saved the continent from dictatorship and gave it the peace and prosperity that democracy brings, is now walking away.

The Scottish Parliament on Wednesday again voted against the whole Brexit process, as it has done throughout (except for the Conservatives, of course). MSPs were not distracted by the debate over this Christmas deal versus no deal which had raged on Twitter the day or two before.

Tariff-free trade has come at a huge price, especially for Scotland. Our services and financial industries are left

isolated from their closest overseas market. Our fishing and farming industries will suffer serious losses. Freedom of movement for work and tourism is being disrupted. And everywhere there's more bureaucracy, not less. We have in fact lost our sovereignty, not taken back control, because we will be forced to accept European standards on trade, working conditions and the environment without any say in the councils of Europe that set them.

Not much wonder there is some disillusionment in Scotland with the UK Government and growing support for independence (58 per cent according to the latest opinion polls). The SNP look set to win the next election in May 2021 with an overall majority, not just because of Brexit, but also because of Nicola Sturgeon's competent handling of the Covid crisis.

But May is a long time away. Anything can happen, as a look back at 2020 has shown. It began predictably enough with storms, floods and fires, continuing civil wars in the Middle East, the death of elderly sports and film stars. And then in March we were hit by Covid. There were 4,000 deaths before we'd realised what we had to do – lockdown, applaud the NHS, finally get around to testing in our nursing homes, put schools and colleges on “blended learning” , cancel exams, stop people travelling, shut down the pubs and restaurants, stop visiting each others' homes, move our lives online.

No surprise that out of my ten predictions for 2020, only three have come true.

I thought we could avoid Brexit. I thought Putin's Russia would become much more threatening. And I failed to foresee the tide changing on the climate emergency. I did however, correctly predict that Celtic would win “the treble” for the fourth consecutive year and that Scotland's women footballers would play in the World Cup, though both turned out to be more of a scramble than I imagined.

Thus chastened, I am not going to make predictions for 2021.



Pentland cairn

Instead, I leave this chastening year with these photographs of my walk on Tuesday with a friend over the snow covered Pentland Ridge. Beneath us the city of Edinburgh was etched out in black and white, stretching to the blue sea. Above us, at least a dozen people were lined up like climbers on Mt Everest heading for the summit and fleeing the pandemic below. Then we came down to the little village of Swanston with its thatched cottages and unreal, untroubled air. Children were sledging, dogs were leaping about in the snow, life was back to normal.

Time stood still, waiting for something to happen, like a New Year.



Swanston