

Letter from Scotland

The Prime Minister came to visit us in Scotland on Thursday. Our First Minister wondered if his journey was really “essential” when everyone else is being urged not to travel.

It's not the only thing Nicola Sturgeon and Boris Johnson have disagreed about this week. And it's come at a particularly awful moment in the pandemic when Covid deaths in Britain passed the 100,000 mark and deaths in Scotland have reached nearly 8,000.

Boris didn't come to hang his head in shame, or even show remorse, but to talk up the strength of the Union. During a visit to a Covid vaccination centre in Glasgow and the Valneva vaccine production lab in Livingston he found time to dress as a scientist for the cameras and discuss politics. The UK government's furlough scheme, he said, had saved thousands of jobs. The UK Treasury had given the Scottish Government £8 billion to support the NHS, local councils and business in the struggle against the virus. The UK army was setting up 80 vaccination stations.



Boris, a fish out of water. Cramond beach. But his argument doesn't seem to be cutting much of the ice we've had this week. Some 20 opinion polls now show support for independence at over 50 per cent. The SNP are still heading for an outright victory in the Scottish elections in May (or whenever). The party's manifesto will have a firm

pledge to hold a second independence referendum. And this week the party outlined a plan to hold the referendum, whether the UK government approves or not, and dare Westminster to challenge such a referendum's legitimacy in the courts.



The Prime Minister Boris Johnson visit's Scotland during Covid-19. The Prime Minister Boris Johnson talks to members of the British Army as they assemble a vaccine centre at the Glasgow Club Castlemilk Picture by Andrew Parsons / No 10 Downing Street

The more immediate disagreement, however, is over quarantine for international travellers. Nicola Sturgeon wants all such travellers taken straight to quarantine hotels from the airport while Boris Johnson is content to apply that only to travellers from "red list" countries like South Africa and Brazil. Ms Sturgeon points to the fact that Scotland very nearly eliminated Covid-19 in the summer, only to suffer this second wave because of foreign travel. She's told us all not to book holidays abroad this year.

The opposition parties have been taking her to task over the

vaccine rollout and the testing system. Ruth Davidson, the Conservative leader at Holyrood, said GPs had been telling her they've been left without vaccine supplies for days. Jackie Baillie, Labour's deputy leader, complained that Scotland was lagging behind England in testing and that not enough was being done to support people who are told to self-isolate.

Nicola Sturgeon told them that virtually all residents and staff in nursing homes had been given their first vaccine, everyone over 80 would have their injections by next week and all over 70s by the middle of February. As for testing, Scotland differs from England, not testing at random but only testing front line workers and those with symptoms. And there are signs the testing system and Lockdown is working, with the number of daily cases falling and the reproduction or R rate now below "1."

Damage to the economy, though, is only just beginning. It's already shrunk by 7.1 per cent since the pandemic began according to the latest official figures and it is not expected to fully recover till 2024.

The Finance Secretary Kate Forbes devoted her budget statement on Thursday to rebuilding the economy and tackling the pandemic. The £40billion package includes £1.6billion for employment support and business rates relief. There's an extra £869m for Covid. Public sector workers earning less than £25,000 a year are to get a 3 per cent pay rise, and higher earners 1 per cent. But there will be no income tax rises in this election year and local councils are being given £90m extra if they freeze council tax rates.

Meanwhile, the pandemic continues to take its toll on our railways. ScotRail announced this week it was cutting a further 300 trains from its services. Passenger numbers have fallen by 90 per cent since March and government subsidies have had to double to £1bn to keep the railway system running at all.

An unexpected effect of the virus has been that Scotland's deer population has increased. There's been a drop in demand for venison and the travel restrictions have made shooting parties less fashionable. Instead of 40,000 deer being shot each year, only 30,000 have been culled. So the government's forestry agency is having to spend more money on fencing if it's to reach its target of planting 25 million trees this year.

Then there's the effect on the arts. Celtic Connections had to be broadcast on-line this year. Pop festivals in the summer are unlikely to take place. Organisers of the Edinburgh International and Fringe festivals are pleading for government funding guarantees before they will go ahead. [The Edinburgh International Book Festival](#) will largely take place on-line from a new venue, the Art College rather than Charlotte Square Gardens.

So we look to video entertainment to keep us cheerful. There are the sea-shanty videos, for instance, from Nathan Evans, a young man from Airdrie in a woolly hat. He's given up his day job as a postman to enjoy international fame on Tik Tok and a deal with the record label Polydor. And Danny MacAskill, the daredevil cyclist from Skye, has produced another stomach-churning video, performing the most amazing jumps on his bike in an empty gymnasium.

If only we could leap our way out of this pandemic.



Danny MacAskill