

Letter from Scotland

February has dawned dull, wet and cold. There's deep snow on the hills and a scattering of snow showers and sleet in the lowlands. January was the coldest month we've had for a decade. This week the temperatures at night have hovered around minus 3 or 4C. Several Highland roads and rail lines have been closed and ferries cancelled because of high winds.

Two foolhardy climbers had to be rescued from the cliffs of Ben Nevis and were then fined by the police for travelling out of their home district of Glasgow. It was a reminder that the lockdown is still with us. The ski resorts say they've had the best ski-ing conditions for years but only local people can enjoy them.

And it looks as if the lockdown will continue into March. However, there is what the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon called "a ray of sunshine." The number of Covid cases has been falling all week, though the lagging death figures are still shockingly high at between 50 and 80 a day, bringing the total up to last Sunday according to National Records of Scotland to 8,347. The R number, the reinfection rate, has remained below "1" for another week. This has allowed the government to announce that schools will perhaps begin re-opening on a

phased basis from 22nd February.

At first it will only be for nursery and primary school children and some senior pupils preparing for practical assessments (there are to be no final exams this year). For the rest, it's home-schooling and lessons online.

The big change this week has been a 50 per cent increase in the vaccination programme. Critics of the government have been pointing to a faster rate of vaccination in England than in Scotland. Nicola Sturgeon explains that by saying Scotland has been concentrating on the more difficult target of vaccinating all residents in nursing homes. 99 per cent of the residents in older adult care homes have now been given their first dose. But now that new mass-vaccination centres have opened in Edinburgh and Aberdeen this week, the programme is picking up pace, with 48,165 people being vaccinated in the 24 hours to 8.30am on Friday.

Alister Jack, the UK Government's Scottish Secretary, graciously offered to send in more British soldiers to help Scotland catch up. Ms Sturgeon welcomed the help but couldn't resist pointing out that they were Scotland's soldiers too, paid for by Scottish taxpayers.

This tweet shows her reply (although the comments by GrantDCostello are his own).

<https://twitter.com/GrantDCostello/status/1356949794787319808?s=20>

She's also pointed out to the UK government that there needs to be a tougher approach to international travellers arriving in Britain and bringing new strains of the virus into Scotland. She wants all travellers taken to isolation hotels on arrival, not just those from "red list" countries. But as yet there's been no agreement between the four nations on how hotel quarantine is to be implemented.

Every week new victims of the pandemic emerge into the limelight. This week it's been patients who have had their non-Covid operations postponed, children suffering from mental illness because of Lockdown, the crisis in the retail trade and the live music industry.

We've also had a dramatic illustration of the effect Covid has had on the off-shore oil industry. [A large tanker](#), the Hovden Spirit, has been anchored off Shetland for several weeks waiting for someone to buy its cargo of oil. There's just no demand. Now there's growing alarm that tankers waiting so close to shore in winter weather could break loose and cause a major oil spill like the Braer disaster in January 1993. Meanwhile, back at the oil company head offices of Shell, BP and Exxon, managers this week have been reporting annual losses of £16-£18 billion and talking of further job cuts. The big investors, like the pension funds, are scrambling to get out of oil and into renewables.

Now we are into February, there's the scent of May's Scottish elections in the air. As the opinion polls keep telling us, the SNP are heading for an outright victory. So I wonder why are we hearing the sound of splits inside the party? One of their front bench team at Westminster, Joanna Cherry QC MP, has been unceremoniously "forgotten" in a [reshuffle](#). She's been a thorn in the side of the leadership over her insistence on a robust Plan B if Boris Johnson continues to refuse a second independence referendum. And Alex Salmond, of all people, is busy stirring up unsavoury headlines about a conspiracy against him within the party. Power does indeed corrupt.

Take the case of the former US President. He may be facing impeachment in the US Senate, but this week he escaped being put through the Scottish courts under an "unexplained wealth order" over this purchase of two golf resorts in Scotland. MSP voted 89-32 against the order when the Justice Minister, Humza Yousaf, explained that, whatever people thought about

the former resident of the White House, it is not for politicians to interfere in the legal process.

It may not be "America first" any more but this weekend it is "Scotland first", on the rugby field against England in the first match of the Six Nations competition. Whatever our troubles over elections, Covid or the snow storms, we'll all be rooting for our lads at Twickenham, watching from a safe distance of course, since we've not won there for nearly 40 years.