

Letter from Scotland

Temperatures the lowest for 25 years (-23C in Braemar), three or four inches of snow even in the cities, roads and railways blocked and, between the snow showers, bright blue skies and a cool east wind. Scotland in proper winter conditions.

Yet, it's been warm and dry enough for forest fires in the Western Isles and the craze for "wild swimming" in the rivers, lochs and seas has been featuring almost daily in the newspapers.

The Nordic weather has not put people off their vaccination appointments. People have been battling through the snow and ice to the mass vaccination centres in wartime spirit, wearing their face-coverings like gas masks. A record 64,000 were vaccinated on Wednesday. The first minister Nicola Sturgeon congratulated everyone on "a heroic achievement" when she announced that 1.4 million Scots had been vaccinated, 23 per cent of the adult population and almost all of the most vulnerable.



She told us too that the lockdown is working. The number of daily cases is falling fast, the R number is below one, the number of Covid patients in hospital is down below the spring peak, “another wee ray of sunshine,” she called it. But there is still a lag in the numbers dying, 48 on Thursday, bringing the narrow measure to 6,599 and the wider “suspected” Covid deaths number to 8,726 as of last Sunday.

The one “leakage” point, Ms Sturgeon said, was international travel, bringing new waves of the virus and new strains into Scotland. So The Scottish Government has announced that from this Monday, everyone arriving in Scotland from any country in the world (not just high risk countries as the UK government has it) will have to quarantine in a designated hotel for 10 days, at a cost of £1,750. How about someone arriving at Heathrow or Birmingham or Newcastle and travelling on to Scotland? Well that is a loophole that still needs to be closed and discussions between the UK Government and the Scottish Government are continuing.

Opposition politicians have spent the week trying to take the shine off the SNP as we approach the Scottish elections on 6 May. They have been sharpening their needles and sticking them into the running sore that is the “Salmond affair.” When did Nicola Sturgeon first learn about the allegations of sexual harassment against her predecessor Alex Salmond? And was there a conspiracy against him, which ultimately failed in the courts and cost the taxpayer £500,000 in legal fees? A parliamentary inquiry has so far failed to make sense of the matter and is in danger of sliding into farce. The SNP has not exactly helped itself out of the quagmire with some members siding with Salmond and others with Sturgeon. Underlying the whole affair is the tension between those impatient for a second independence referendum and the majority who favour Nicola Sturgeon’s cautious approach.



Making our way through winter. The scene in my local woods in Edinburgh.

Another bugled legal case has occupied MSPs this week as they debated the "Rangers affair." They demanded an inquiry into how mistakes were made in the prosecution case against directors of the club at the time of its financial collapse a decade ago. It's cost £24m in compensation to two directors so far and total costs may well rise to £100m. The current Lord Advocate, Lord Wolffe, who was not in office at the time, said an inquiry would indeed be held once all legal proceedings had been completed.

And there was more bad news from the football world with the publication on Thursday of a Football Association report into historic child abuse involving a number of leading clubs. 33 cases were highlighted, dating back to the 1970s. The report found that, while no club or individual withheld evidence, suspicions were often not acted upon. It's called on clubs to apologise and there are likely to be claims for compensation.

But rugby football has lifted us out of our winter gloom. Last Saturday's win at Twickenham (Scotland 11, England 6), the first there for 38 years, has kept us cheerful, at least till mid-week when we began to contemplate the next big challenge, Wales at Murrayfield on Saturday. We'll be watching from the safety and warmth of our own homes.

And while America, China and the United Arab Emirates have all been sending rockets to Mars this week, we in Scotland have ordered our own space rocket. It's due to be launched in 2022 from Britain's yet-to-be-built launch site on the island of Unst in Shetland. The UK Pathfinder project – backed by Lockheed Martin – will lift six satellites into Earth orbit on an American rocket.

One small step for Shetland man (well, 140 employees actually) but a giant leap for Scotland.

