

Letter from Scotland

At last the schools are beginning to re-open.

From Monday morning the bell will ring for pupils in the first three years of primary school. Nursery schools too are re-opening. And some senior pupils will be able to return to school to carry out practical assignments for their final certificates. For the rest, it will be a gradual return, by way of “blended learning” partly in school and partly online, if the coronavirus figures continue to fall.

For everyone in education, the past 11 months have been the worst of times. Pupils have lost at least half a year of learning. Teachers have had to adjust to the vagaries of online lessons. Parents have had to cram “home schooling” into their daily schedule. Students have lost out on the hurly burly of “real” university and college life. A survey for The Scottish Government has found that only 40 per cent of 11-25 year olds feel good about their mental health and wellbeing.



Back to school. Preston Street Primary, Edinburgh, MSPs vented their frustration in parliament by declaring the government’s education agency Education Scotland and the Qualifications Authority “not fit for purpose.” The Education Secretary John Swinney tried to defend both institutions but he was voted down by 65 to 58. Reform cannot be far away.

Meanwhile, The Scottish Government is spending £200 per pupil on extra teachers and support staff to counter the effects of the pandemic, more than in England and Wales and Northern Ireland. But it been criticised for not targeting enough on pupils in deprived communities, who, as usual, are suffering the most.

There are fears that the slow progress in closing “the attainment gap” has come to a shuddering halt. Before the pandemic the gap stood at 8.4 per cent. That’s the difference between the 96.7 per cent of school leavers in prosperous areas who go on to work, college or university and the 88.3 per cent who do so from deprived areas. The government says it’s spending £124m trying to close the attainment gap, over and above the Covid funding, but we won’t know whether that will succeed for several years. The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, has said she wants to be judged on this measure above all others.

That was before the pandemic of course. Now it’s all about how she’s handling the immediate crisis. This week she’s been saying the lockdown and the vaccination programme are starting to work. The number of Covid-19 cases is down, hospital admissions are down, the reproduction rate is below “one”, and the number of deaths is down, though still high at 323 in the week to Sunday, bringing the total to 9,053.

The government claims it has reached its target of delivering the first dose of the vaccine to everyone over 70 years of age, all front line NHS workers and all residents and staff of nursing homes. The vaccine appears to be working especially well in nursing homes where the death rate has fallen by 62 per cent in the last three weeks. There are of course exceptions and occasional lapses in the system which the newspapers expose and the opposition politicians highlight. But overall what the Army calls “the biggest logistical operation since the Second World War” has gone well...so far!

And then, to spoil everything, we have the farce of allowing the virus to fly back into the country via Heathrow or Manchester or Dublin. The London and Edinburgh governments have not managed to close the loophole whereby passengers from so called “low-risk countries” can arrive in Scotland via England and Ireland without having to stay 10 days in quarantine hotels.

There are other ink blots on the government's copy book. A report from the Auditor General this week made the fairly predictable observation that Scotland was not properly prepared for a serious pandemic. The parliament's Health committee has called for fundamental reform of the NHS to concentrate on prevention rather than cure. And our 32 local councils are disappointed that not all of the UK government's extra Covid funding of £1.1bn is being passed on to them to compensate for their extra spending during the pandemic.

I wonder what our new Citizens Assembly would do about all this. Would they be better than the experts? The Assembly was set up by the government with the lofty aim of tidying up our ragged democracy. It consists of 100 citizens chosen at random. This week they published their recommendations, among them a committee of citizens to scrutinise legislation in parliament and local citizen assemblies to make sure MSPs and local councillors consult their communities "rather than sticking to party lines." Politics without politics, hummm.

Finally, while the human species is struggling, there was some good news this week for our wildlife. A survey has found that 76 per cent of people in Scotland are in favour of "rewilding". The survey was carried out for the Rewilding Alliance of more than 20 organisations which are campaigning for Scotland to become the first "rewilding nation", protecting 30 per cent of its land and sea from human intervention.

And this is in a week when beavers have been spotted building dams in Perth and rare "great yellow" bumblebees have been found nesting in Caithness.