

# Letter from Scotland

**It's been a particularly troubling week in this Age of Uncertainty. Maybe it's been the wind and rain that's blown us off kilter.**

**But everything seems to be swaying uneasily – the route out of Lockdown, the economy, the monarchy, our parliament, the SNP. The pandemic has made us all so brittle, so judgmental.**

**I'm frightened to say anything for fear of offending someone or contravening the new Hate Crimes Bill.**

But here goes. Yes, Rangers fans were wrong to stage their street party in Glasgow last weekend to celebrate their team winning the League but it's a wrong easily forgiven and best forgotten. Which of us has not broken the Covid rules? For the police to have intervened might have led to violence and disaster. Living under lockdown is not easy and this week's slight easing of restrictions is small comfort. Four people from two households are allowed to meet outdoors from Friday. Children's non-contact sports can resume.



## Signs of an uncertain spring

With the Covid numbers continuing to fall however, all school pupils on Monday will return to part-time class room learning until Easter and a full re-opening of schools is planned after the Easter holidays. Church services can resume in time for Holy Week. It also looks like Scotland will be returning to a regional tiered system of restrictions in May if the virus continues to lose its battle with the vaccine. This week has seen case numbers fall to around 500 a day. There's been an average of 20 deaths a day, which brought the total, up to last Sunday, to 9,725.

The Scottish government's budget, passed this week, allows for a 4 per cent pay rise for public sector workers earning less than £25,000 a year and a 2 per cent rise for those earning up to £49,000. This is in contrast to the UK government's 1 per cent proposed rise for nurses in England and a freeze for all other public sector workers. Kate Forbes the finance secretary managed to win the agreement of the Greens and the Liberal Democrats to get her budget approved by 70 votes to 53.

Her budget also includes £90m for local councils who agree to freeze council tax this year. And the 32 councils have fallen over themselves to accept this equivalent of a 3 per cent rise. It was perhaps an offer councillors could not refuse but it surprises me that no one wants to raise more money for schools, care services, roads and waste recycling etc , all vital local services which have suffered so many cuts during the years of austerity. Council tax is on average 14 per cent lower in real terms than it was a decade ago and there is an even stronger case for increases on properties worth over £500,000.

MSPs spent most of this week tangled up in the government's controversial Hate Crimes Bill. Over 40 amendments kept them debating well into Wednesday evening and again on Thursday,

before it was finally agreed. The justice secretary Humza Yousaf wanted to extend the existing law against stirring up racial hatred to include, religious, disability, age, sexual orientation and transgender hatred.

Even before the debate Mr Yousaf conceded that, to protect free speech, there would have to be a proved intention to cause hatred. And during the debate an amendment was passed to protect the human right to express opinions which may “offend, shock or disturb” people. But there were long arguments about whether women should be singled out as a special group to be protected under the Bill – that was voted down, despite fears over women’s safety. There was even discussion on the definition of “woman.” It is indeed an Age of Uncertainty.

Meanwhile the “Salmond affair” has rumbled on with more documents published and more cries of “cover-up” by the Conservatives and failed votes of no confidence. Normal people (if I’m allowed to use that phrase) don’t need to know about this until two inquiries report back next month. But the matter has resulted in a slump in the opinion polls for the SNP and a fall in support for independence. The latest poll in The Scotsman shows support for the SNP down 6 compared to last month at 48 per cent and support for independence down 4 on 49 per cent, but there was a rider on the poll that it was “unweighted”.

Finally, the futuristic Bush Estate south of Edinburgh is to be the site of a new £74m “agri-tech hub” paid for by the UK and Scottish Governments’ “Cities Deal”. It will be dedicated to solving the problems of global food supply and reducing the carbon footprint of agriculture.

But more immediately, farmers in Morayshire just want decent internet access. One of the campaigners set up his desk and computer in a field at Finderne near Forres, surrounded by inquisitive cows, and challenged the minister for “connectivity” Paul Wheelhouse to try running a business with

a dodgy internet connection.

Hey diddle diddle

The scientists can fiddle

So that cows can jump over the Moon.

So why can't we cable

So that farmers are able

To get decent internet soon?