

Letter from Scotland

This week there's a feeling that "We're almost there!" Somewhere out on the horizon, the tide has turned.

Governments, north and south of the border, have given us dates for the steps out of lockdown. Here in Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon told parliament that life may be close to normal by the summer. Suddenly, in just a week, the atmosphere has changed from uncertainty to anticipation.

On 2 April, if the Covid figures continue to fall, the "Stay at Home" order will change to "stay local". On 5 April, garden centres and hairdressers can re-open. On 26 April, shops and restaurants start serving again, people from three households can meet outside and we'll be able to travel throughout Scotland.

Indoor family meetings can happen from the middle of May and by the end of June, we'll all be in "Level one", meaning life as normal except for the two metre distance rule and mask-wearing in confined spaces.



Waiting for the tide to turn. Fisherrow Harbour, Musselburgh. All this is possible because the vaccination programme has done well – over two million Scots have now had at least one dose. Although there's been a slight rise in the number of Covid cases, the hospital admission rate is well down. The death rate is also falling fast, 104 in the week to Sunday, bringing that total to 9,831.

All we have to do now is stop travellers from abroad flying in

with new variants of the virus. That's going to be a problem. But to help keep track of the virus, we are getting a new £13m Genomic Sequencing Centre which will be able to analyse a thousand samples a day – and not just of Covid-19 but of any new viruses in the future.

The fine spring weather has also lifted our mood and perhaps encouraged people to play a little fast and loose with the rules. On St Patrick's Day large crowds of leprechauns gathered in the sunshine in Kelvingrove Park in Glasgow and on the Meadows in Edinburgh. I wonder what will happen after the Old Firm game between Celtic and Rangers this weekend.



Sarah's Tree in The Meadows 17 March 2021 PHOTO ©2021 The Edinburgh Reporter

Certainly the police will be cautious about breaking up any such crowds, unlike the police in London who waded into the crowds of women who gathered on Clapham Common protesting against male violence following the murder of Sarah Everard.

I felt that this was another moment of tide change, like the "Black Lives Matter" demonstrations. In parliament, some MSPs have been regretting the fact that they didn't take the opportunity in the Hate Crime Bill last week to include women in the categories of people against whom it would be an offence to "stir up hatred".

This week too has seen the tide turn towards the Scottish parliamentary elections on 6 May. Both Boris Johnson and Labour's Keir Starmer have tip-toed north of the border recently. On-line party conferences have been held. The parliament itself and the government are rushing to get things tidied up before the end of term on 25 March. Two inquiries into the "Salmond affair" are due to publish their reports. The SNP want to get their draft Independence Bill through its first vote, outlining a written constitution and how an independent Scotland would work. In short, everything from now on has to be seen through a campaigning kaleidoscope.



Image shows, Michael Matheson MSP – Cabinet Secretary for Transport, Infrastructure and Connectivity (orange jacket) photographed with Dr. Ben Todd, CEO of Arcola Energy (hi-viz waistcoat) and a 314 Class electric train at the Scotrail Yoker Depot in Yoker, Glasgow on 14th December 2020. The train has been decommissioned and will be taken to Bo'ness where it will be converted to run on hydrogen.

I wonder if that's how we should see this week's announcement from the Transport Secretary Michael Matheson that the Scottish railways are to be "nationalised." ScotRail services have been run under franchise by the state-owned Dutch company Abellio for the last eight years. Although it's spent £475m on new trains, it's not performed as well as expected (even without counting the 90 per cent fall in passengers due to the pandemic) and the contract is being ended two years early, in March 2022.

ScotRail will then be run by a new company, wholly owned by The Scottish Government. It's not quite nationalisation, because the tracks and stations will still be run by Network Rail, the UK government's railway agency. And thereby hangs a tale of potential confusion.

To be fair to Network Rail however, it has almost completed a £120m redevelopment of Queens Street Station in Glasgow and it has teamed up with The City of Edinburgh Council to revamp Waverley Station here in Edinburgh. The plan is for a new "mezzanine concourse across the whole station" allowing longer platforms beneath and, of course, more shops.

Waverley is already a shrine to the "founding father of Scottish tourism" Sir Walter Scott, the author of the Waverley novels, whose 250 anniversary is being celebrated this year. In fact, the celebrations begin this weekend with a "light show" at Smailholm Tower in his beloved Borders and an on-line event featuring people who have actually read his novels.

I've read quite a few. I've had to, because I live on the

Walter Scott estate on the south side of Edinburgh. All the streets around here are named after places and characters in his novels and poems.

One of them is Marmion Crescent, after one of Scott's saga poems in which the famous line appears: "Oh what a tangled web we weave when first we practice to deceive." It's a great line for those entering an election campaign and for those urging too early an exit from lockdown.

