

Letter from Scotland

Despite the pandemic and despite the collapse of the economy, Democracy goes marching on. The election campaign for the 129 seats in the Scottish Parliament is under way. Voting takes place on 6 May – or before, if you are voting by post. It's thought around half of the four million voters will vote by post.

We are not the only country daring to stage an election in the middle of a pandemic. Wales is joining us. The Netherlands and Israel did so earlier this week. The USA did so in November. And local elections are taking place, also on 6th May, in the English cities and counties. What makes us different is that “independence” is on the agenda.



Jumping through hoops at the Scottish Parliament

On Monday, the SNP published its Independence Referendum Bill which would pave the way for a second referendum on Scottish independence in the first half of the new parliamentary session ie by 2023. If the SNP win a majority on May 6th, which looks possible, the Bill will be passed and then it will become a test of wills between Boris Johnson's “No” and Nicola Sturgeon's “We insist” on whether the referendum goes ahead.

I say an SNP majority is "possible". A few short weeks ago, I would have said "probable". The average of the last four opinion polls puts SNP support at 49 per cent, down from 54 per cent in January. That's still well ahead of the other parties (Conservatives about 23 per cent, Labour 20 per cent, Lib Dems 6 per cent and Greens 3 per cent, though the Greens' support increases to around 8 per cent in the Regional seats).

Support for independence has also slipped below 50 per cent for the first time in almost a year.

The reasons are not entirely clear. It may be pandemic fatigue, or a fear of going it alone in a new world of plagues and economic recessions. Or it may be that we're getting used to the disaster of Brexit. But it may also be due to the "Salmond affair."

It came to a head this week, the final tumultuous week of this parliament. On Monday, the independent Irish lawyer James Hamilton published his report which cleared Nicola Sturgeon of breaching the ministerial code. He found she had behaved correctly after she was told Alex Salmond, her predecessor, was facing allegations of sexual assault. Then on Tuesday, a parliamentary inquiry concluded that the Scottish government had mishandled the complaints but Ms Sturgeon herself had not "knowingly" misled parliament. Despite these findings, the Conservatives pressed ahead with a motion of no confidence in the first minister which was soundly beaten by 65 votes to 31.

Looking back on it all, it was a storm in vindictive tea-cup. When all is said and done, the two women making the allegations did have their day in court, despite the Scottish government's expensive failures in the case. Alex Salmond was found not guilty and both parliament and government have learned salutary lessons for the future. The opinion polls have found that most people believe Nicola Sturgeon acted correctly and that Alex Salmond's theory of a conspiracy against him is unconvincing.

It was all a huge distraction from the major issues facing the nation. But on Wednesday we recovered our dignity to mark the anniversary of the Covid Lockdown, the 23rd March 2020. Nearly 10,000 people in Scotland have died with Covid in that year (9,897 as of last Sunday), over 126,000 across the whole of Britain, one of the worst death rates in the world. And yet, we are a rich country and had plenty of warning. Would Scotland on its own have done better ? I don't know.

At any rate, we are now doing better. Deaths are down to less than 10 a day. Half the population have been vaccinated. The emergency Louisa Jordan hospital at the exhibition centre in Glasgow has been de-commissioned. Lockdown is due to end on 26 April. Churches and all religious institutions are allowed to re-open for services this weekend. In fact, the Scottish government was found legally at fault for insisting churches close during the Lockdown. A number of ministers and priests who questioned the State's right to rule on religious matters, won their case at the Court of Session.

In gratitude for the heroic efforts of 154,000 lower-paid NHS workers who have seen us through the crisis so far, the Scottish government is offering them a 4 per cent pay rise, at a cost of £300m. It shames the 1 per cent rise being proposed for nurses in England and may not be entirely unconnected with the election campaign.

Also just in time for the campaign, the Citizen's Assembly and the Just Transition Commission have published reports calling for a bigger effort to tackle climate change, by individuals as well as governments. To this end, the Scottish government has announced a £40m grant for bus companies to help them purchase of 200 electric buses, most of them to be built at Alexander Dennis in Falkirk. The UK government for its part announced a £16bn "transition plan" to help North Sea oil companies develop carbon-capture and hydrogen schemes.

Finally, little Brora Rangers, a part-time side in the

Highland League, humbled the mighty Hearts of Midlothian with a 2:1 victory on Tuesday night in the Scottish Cup. They hadn't played a competitive game since January. So if Brora can do a bit of giant killing, so can Scotland in the World Cup. In the first match of the qualifying rounds, at Hampden against Austria on Thursday night, we were treated to a 2:2 thriller.