

Letter from Scotland

Scotland's leading businessman and philanthropist, Sir Tom Hunter, has entered the election campaign with a call for all the political parties to spell out how they will revive the economy after the Covid-19 pandemic. Sir Tom says they're good at spending money but not creating it.

How true. Every leaflet I get through my letterbox is full of promises to improve the health service, fund social care, build more homes, hire more teachers, repair the roads, build more windmills and save the planet. But there's nothing about how to pay for it all.

Sir Tom commissioned a report from the economic forecaster Oxford Economics which argues that government and the private sector should be investing in the industries of the future, like renewable energy, to create the wealth to pay for better public services. And the scale needs to be huge, akin to the investment in Silicon Valley in California in the 1970s and 80s. "Let's use Covid-19 to reinvent what our future looks like," said Sir Tom.



Can windmills save the nation ? Claude Monet 1871

Indeed Scotland should have a bright future in renewable energy. A previous first minister once declared we could be

the “Saudi Arabia of renewable energy” blessed as we are with 25 per cent of Europe’s wind and water-power resources. This week the west coast has been buffeted by 70 mph winds and snow showers.

Almost all our electricity already comes from wind farms and hydro dams (97 per cent). But only 6.5 per cent of our other energy needs (heating and transport) comes from renewables. We still rely on oil, gas and nuclear. Carbon capture, wave and tidal power have been in their infancy for decades, starved of the funds needed to grow up.

Sir Tom and the Oxford economists suggest the government borrows money and “innovates” in public services, like health and education, to free up resources for investment in businesses and industry to help the economy grow. Renewable energy has already created 17,700 jobs in Scotland and there’s the potential for many more, some say 50,000.

As Sir Tom must know, business growth does not just mean heavy industry. He made his first fortune in sports ware and his second in house building. What that younger Tom Hunter from Ayrshire must have had when he started selling running shoes from the back of his van was ambition and a plan. And this is what he is calling for from the politicians.

So this week on the campaign trail we got the SNP offering to boost NHS spending by 10 per cent, Labour promising a National Jobs Agency and the Conservatives wanting a quicker exit from the Covid Lockdown. There is still a lot to play for, with four weeks to go to election day. The latest opinion poll, in The Scotsman newspaper, puts the SNP on the brink of a majority, with 49 per cent support, the Conservatives on 23 percent, Labour 18 per cent and the Liberal Democrats on 6 per cent. The Greens, who are only standing in the regional lists, are on 9 per cent.

Alex Salmond, of the aforementioned Saudi Arabia boast, and

his new party, the Alba Party, does not register in the poll. Nor does his opposite number on the Unionist side, George Galloway. Mr Galloway threw his hat into the ring on Wednesday and then put it back on again to announce that his All for Unity Party would be putting up candidates in all eight regional lists. A vote for Alex Salmond he declared would put Scotland "on the road to Catalonia" and all the trouble and strife that independence movement has caused in Spain.

And where is the pandemic in all this? It's been a quiet week of progress, with cases falling in the face of the vaccine rollout. We are recording around 300 cases a day and less than 10 deaths a day. The total, as of Sunday, was 9,997. This week hairdressers and garden centres opened up and the first minister announced that all pupils would return to school next week after the Easter holidays. We are still on target to open up further on 26th April, with non-essential shops, pubs and restaurants allowed to resume business if social distancing can be observed.

There's delight too among football fans that Scotland will be playing in the European finals in mid-June at Hampden Park in front a "real" crowd of up to 12,000 people, a quarter of the stadium's normal capacity. If all goes well.

Outdoor theatre is hoping to resume too. Scottish Opera is leading the way with plans for performances in 40 venues across the summer and across the country, from Hawick in the Borders to Haddo House in Aberdeenshire. They will be staging five Gilbert and Sullivan shows, including the Pirates of Penzance, the Gondoliers and the Mikado.

I hope by then we'll be in the mood for comic opera and not tragedy.