

Letter from Scotland

We have been given back our “right to roam”. The coronavirus figures are now good enough for Nicola Sturgeon to make the surprise announcement that she is lifting the “stay local” restriction and allowing us to travel anywhere in Scotland to visit friends and family. But only outside and only for the day.

What a sense of freedom, for those of us cooped in our cities for the last four months. The weather too has turned milder after the coldest April temperatures for eight years, -4C in many places overnight, -9C in the Highlands. It's also been unusually dry, so much so that the Fire Service is warning of the danger of forest fires across much of the Highlands.



Onwards and upwards. The road to recovery.

We are now looking forward to shops, pubs and restaurants re-opening on 26 April. From 17 May, two households will be allowed to “socialise indoors” and cinemas and bingo halls can re-open, all subject to government guidance of course. In early June, football stadiums will be able to accommodate socially-distanced crowds. And by July, we'll be back to near normal, with even talk of an Edinburgh Festival and Fringe. If all goes well. And so far it is going well. Covid-19 cases are

down to around 230 a day, hospitals are treating fewer patients (115) and deaths have fallen to an average of 4 a day, taking the total last Sunday to 10,031.

At present in Scotland, only 20 people are allowed at funeral services, and we've had to become used to saying "goodbye" online, watching from afar. Rather like this weekend when the nation is saying "thank you and farewell" to Prince Philip. Happily, he had special connections with Scotland, quite apart from being Duke of Edinburgh. He was one of the first pupils at Gordonstoun School in Morayshire. His ship was based at Rosyth during the war. He carried on the conservation work of Prince Albert at Balmoral. And some 30,000 young Scots enrol every year in his Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme.



Duke of Edinburgh at Holyrood in 2016. Photo © 2016 Martin McAdam.

The election campaign went into a respectful silence last weekend and will again this Saturday for the Duke's funeral. But otherwise it's been business as usual. And a bruising business it was during the second TV debate between the main party leaders. This time, in the absence of an audience, they were allowed to cross-examine each other which resulted in a good deal of over-talking, a rudeness you would think professional debaters would have learned to avoid. No one came out on top, but Labour's new leader Anas Sarwar was reckoned to do well by the pundits.

On Thursday, Nicola Sturgeon launched the SNP's [manifesto](#) and then went on to have her Covid injection. She said if she had to postpone any independence referendum until the pandemic was over, she would do so. But she hopes to hold it sometime during the next five years, if there's a majority for it in The Scottish Parliament, which still looks likely.

The manifesto itself, as you can imagine was full of expensive promises – 20 per cent more for the NHS over five years, 3,500

extra teachers and classroom assistants, doubling the Scottish Child Payment to £20 a week. But the SNP say it can all be afforded within the existing estimates of Westminster grants and Scottish tax revenues.

The only party suggesting tax increases to pay for new investments is the Green Party which also launched its manifesto this week. It wants a 1 per cent "millionaires tax" on wealth (including the value of homes and other assets) and a frequent-flyers levy.

This week the think-tank, the IPPR, suggested an easy way to raise revenue would be to tax the rising value of homes. It says if Council Tax in Scotland had kept up with rises in England, councils would have £900m more to spend on local services. Instead the SNP have frozen Council Tax and all the parties seem terrified of increasing it, even though the poorest households are exempt from paying it.

Finally, Greta Thunberg has entered the debate over whether the UN Climate Change Conference should go ahead in Glasgow in November. The 18-year-old campaigner she said she won't be coming from Sweden because the Covid pandemic makes it impossible for poorer countries to be represented.

Meanwhile Glasgow City Council is going ahead with recruiting the 1,000 volunteers needed to look after the 20,000 guests expected. I'm puzzled as to why it needs so many people flying in from all over the world to make fine speeches when we all know exactly what they, and we, need to do – cut our carbon footprint drastically and soon. Can't they just send in their pledges by post and stick to them?

Oh if everything were simple, and not quite so hard.