

# Letter from Scotland

**We are doing so well with our vaccination programme and with cutting the number of Covid cases that, from Monday, the economy is finally being opened up for business.**

All shops, pubs and restaurants, visitor attractions, camp sites and holiday cottages can welcome customers again, including visitors from England. But we are only dropping down to Level 3 restrictions which still mean limitations of household mixing, mask-wearing indoors, sanitising and social distancing.

And there's the rub. Because many businesses are not viable with a two metre distance between each customer, although the First Minister said the guidance had not changed since last year. In pubs and restaurants it's been reduced to one metre but, even then, a group of six people requires a very large table with everybody sitting at shouting-distance apart, rather like a Mad Hatter's Tea Party. It's all very awkward and it's just beginning to expose the damage done to the economy.



Back to work....but what work ?

Surprisingly, unemployment has been contained, at 4.4 per cent or 120,000 people. But over 300,000 are on the government's furlough scheme and who knows how many of them will join the unemployment queue when the scheme ends in September. Already youth unemployment is at 12 per cent.

The political parties, with just over two weeks to go till the Scottish parliamentary elections, are all promising to concentrate on "the recovery." They all say they'll increase spending on business, on the NHS, on schools, on infrastructure and green energy.....but not so much as to increase taxes, the Green Party excepted. The Conservatives even want to cut taxes.

Looking through the party manifestos, there are surprisingly few promises on how many new jobs their plans will create. Strange, when we are facing an unemployment tsunami. Labour top the list with a plans for 170,000 jobs in social housing, energy efficiency, a conservation corp and kick-start schemes for jobs in the private sector.

Next come the Greens with hopes for 100,000 new jobs in energy, transport, insulating homes, plus another 5,500 teaching posts. The SNP match that 100,000 but 30,000 of those will be apprenticeships. The Conservatives promise 60,000 new jobs, including 3,000 more teachers. And the Liberal Democrats talk of creating 34,000 jobs in energy efficiency and a jobs guarantee for all 16-24 year olds.

Simply picking out the jobs figures from the manifestos is, I admit, not a fair comparison. Estimating the number of jobs arising from any spending promise is not easy. But none of the estimates come near the number of new jobs likely to be required to keep unemployment down to the current 4.4 per cent. Nor does it describe the quality of the jobs being created. Will they pay a living wage ? Will they be satisfying ? Will they be sustainable ? I come away with the feeling that the jobs crisis is not being taken as seriously as it should be and the politicians are not showing the necessary leadership.

Perhaps this is why the opinion polls are predicting a standstill parliament, with the SNP just short of an outright majority, relying on the Greens to push through much of their

agenda, particularly a second independence referendum. Support for independence has also dropped back to the 45 per cent achieved at the first referendum in 2014.

It may also be due to people not wanting to destabilise the ship while we are only just coming out of the Covid storm. Infections are now down to around 200 a day. Daily deaths are down to single figures. The latest total stands at 10,055. Second doses of vaccine are now well under way (900,000) and there's talk of a vaccination certificate to allow people to travel abroad.

We are even at the stage when ministers are suggesting a Covid Inquiry should begin, to learn the lessons of the early days. They've admitted that mistakes were made, such as moving some 3,500 elderly patients from hospitals to nursing homes without testing for Covid first. But they said that was the best medical advice at the time, given the need to free up hospital beds quickly for the expected surge in coronavirus cases. A report which originally concluded there was no statistical link between hospital discharges and deaths in care homes was re-issued this week with the caveat that a small effect cannot be ruled out.

Finally, in a week when an alliance of 22 environmental organisations are calling for the "rewilding" of 30 per cent of all public land in Scotland, it's pleasing to discover that a rare and brave little creature has begun his own rewilding project. The cow wheat shieldbug, black with two distinctive white spots on its back, has been spotted in the Cairngorms for the first time in 30 years. It's thought to be a sign that the return of traditionally managed woodlands has led to more cow wheat growing in sunlit glades. So if the shieldbug can stage a comeback, let's hope our economy can too.