

# Letter from Scotland

There's a gentle air of midsummer rustling through the café awnings. People sit discussing the warm weather or Scotland's prospects in our first European football finals for 23 years or the rollout of the Covid vaccine.

They might even be contemplating going to an outside concert or planning a staycation. It's summer time and the living is easy.

Yet the struggle with the pandemic is not over. As I write there's still wild debate about the "fan zone" set up on Glasgow Green. Three thousand people will be allowed to sit drinking at tables, in the open air, watching the big screens as 24 nations in the European football finals battle it out in stadiums around the continent, including Hampden across the river. Scotland's first match, against the Czech Republic, is on Monday at Hampden when 12,000 fans will be allowed to attend. At neither venue is there to be mandatory Covid testing.



Street cafe society...even in Edinburgh  
It's prompted a good deal of "whit-a-boot-ery" when this special treatment for football is compared with restrictions

elsewhere. Children's soft play centres remain closed. Cruise ships are forbidden from landing. Bars and restaurants have to stop serving alcohol at 10.30pm. Schools are requiring pupils to take a Covid test and wear masks in class. Residents in nursing homes have to wear masks in all communal areas.

The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon says the recovery from Covid is still at a "fragile" stage and she won't be announcing any further easing of level 2 restrictions until at least 21 June when Boris Johnson hopes to end all restrictions in England. Case numbers [are still rising in Scotland](#) as the move out of lockdown continues (700-900 cases a day). There's new concern over the spread of the Delta strain among school children. But hospital cases remain stable at about 120 and deaths are running at one a day, taking the total last Sunday to 10,130.

With the end of term looming, school teachers are sitting with ice packs on their heads, agonising over what "assessment" to give their senior pupils, an A or B to Calum, a B or C to Hamish. There are no exams this year and no one wants a repeat of last year's disaster in which a clumsy algorithm was used to moderate teachers' assessments to bring them into line with the school's past performance.

There's still some confusion over the use of classroom tests (are they exams by another name?) and over whether a school's past performance is to be taken into account. But the new Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville has made it plain that the teacher's judgement will be the final decider.

She's also announced a review of the whole exam system and the structure and role of the Scottish Qualifications Authority and Education Scotland, the government agency charged with improving the education system. It comes ahead of what's expected to be a poor report on Scottish education from the international research body, the OECD.

The Covid pandemic is exposing many a weakness in our society. The increasing gap between rich and poor is another example. On Tuesday the Social Justice Secretary, Shona Robison, announced a new national mission “to eradicate poverty in Scotland.” She called for cross-party support for this noble effort but it immediately led to a row over independence.

The SNP blames Westminster for holding back the fight on poverty by issuing Scotland with austerity budgets, cuts in welfare and a miserly minimum wage. The Conservatives and Labour say the SNP government is not using the powers it already has to tackle poverty. Certainly the SNP have been reluctant to raise taxes and have even imposed a freeze on council tax.



MV Loch Seaforth

Was it austerity or was it carelessness that caused the engines to fail on the vital ferry boat, MV Loch Seaforth, which plies between Ullapool and Stornoway? It's only just returned to service after two months in the repair yard, causing havoc to ferry services across the Western Isles. It should have had its piston screws replaced three years ago as part of its regular maintenance but for reasons we still don't know, this was not done. We need to wake up. Perhaps we're having too much summer sun.

Finally, Scotland's farmers are waking up to the consequences of Brexit with fears this week over a new deal with Australia which would mean cheap imports of lamb and beef put Scotland's farmers out of business. Not only would it mean many more carbon miles, but food and animal welfare standards are lower in Australia than in Scotland.

No doubt it will be one of the talking points at next week's Royal Highland Agricultural Show at Ingliston near Edinburgh. But the talking will take place only over the internet, since there will be no 190,000 crowd as normal. At least the show

hasn't been cancelled, like last year, but the public will only be able to view the prize cattle and sheep, watch the horse-jumping and attend the cookery sessions by video. It's the story of the past year and this strange midsummer.



At the Royal Highland Show in 2019 PHOTO ©2019 The Edinburgh Reporter