

Letter from Scotland

Our Olympians return from the Tokyo Games this weekend to find a country released from the Covid restrictions (though not quite), a capital city enjoying an international festival (though not quite) and ready to return to work at school and in the office (though not quite).

But we may allow ourselves a brief period of rejoicing. Our 50 Scottish athletes have done us proud, beginning with Duncan Scott and his four swimming medals, followed by a host of other good performances. Not all of them resulted in medals but it's the taking part that counts. And it's simply being there that impresses me, thinking of all the training our Olympians have done and all the sacrifices their families and friends have made.



The "Chariots of Fire" beach at St Andrews
For the crowds on television – alas only on television – it has been entertaining, and at times inspirational. I still think it would have been better to postpone the Games for another year but who am I to question the corporate chiefs who insisted they went ahead.

On the other hand, the business-as-usual decision by The Scottish Government is probably the right one at the end of a

truly gruesome 15 months. On Tuesday, the First Minister announced to [a virtual session of parliament](#) that from Monday the social distancing and home-meeting rules are to be ended, all businesses will be allowed to open, and there will be a loosening of the self-isolation rules. Nicola Sturgeon said these freedoms had been “hard earned” while the vaccination programme was being rolled out.



Nicola Sturgeon speaking to a virtual session of parliament on Tuesday 3 August PHOTO courtesy of The Scottish Government But this Level Zero does not mean an end to all restrictions. In fact, a lot remain. It will still be a legal requirement to wear face-coverings in shops and on public transport. Senior school pupils will still have to wear masks in class for the first six weeks, though that may change after Wednesday’s announcement that 16-17 year olds are to be offered the [vaccine](#). People are still being urged to work from home. Gatherings of more than 2,000 people indoors and 5,000 outdoors will still need special permission. And there could still be local lockdowns and travel restrictions.

“The pandemic is not over yet,” said Ms Sturgeon, “to declare victory would be premature.” The Covid figures are only slowly coming down, still around thousand new cases a day, 400 in hospital and 6 deaths a day, taking Sunday’s total to 10,370.

Nicola Sturgeon was keen to discuss the next steps in the Covid fight-back with the Prime Minister when he came to Scotland on Wednesday for a two-day visit. But Mr Johnson had other plans. He was here to reassure the police in Scotland that they had the full support of UK forces for the security of the UN climate change conference in Glasgow in November. I wonder what trouble he is expecting? Not to be outdone, the UK Labour leader Sir Keir Starmer is on a three-day visit as part of his efforts to rebuild the party in Scotland.

The UK leaders will no doubt notice that the Covid crisis has

cost us dear. The Scottish economy went into a 20 per cent dive last summer and is still 7.6 per cent below par. Although the official unemployment rate remained at an optimistic 4 per cent, there were 242,000 workers on the UK government's furlough job support scheme. There are still 140,000 on furlough and a fifth of employers say it's doubtful they can take all their employees back when the scheme ends next month. Around 200 pubs have closed completely. And it's all cost the UK Government nearly £400 billion, most of which was borrowed and will have to be repaid over the next few decades.

Most of the damage has been to the retail, hospitality and cultural sectors, all of which are labour intensive and which, up till now, governments have largely ignored. Take, for instance, the "arts, entertainment and recreation" sector. It used to employ 78,000 people – more than the finance industry or agriculture – yet it gets relatively little government attention or financial support. Out of £185 million special Covid funding from The Scottish Government, only £3 million was for the cultural industries.



Assembly Festival launch, George Square Gardens, Edinburgh, 3 August 2021

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Just £1 million was spent rescuing the Edinburgh Festival and Fringe. But, even with this modest funding, this month's festivals are going ahead, starting this weekend. Instead of the usual 3,500 performances at 300 venues, we will have 1100 performances at 100 venues. Brave ventures in these Covid times.

The Level 0 minus 1 rules have been announced just too late to up-date most festival plans. So concerts and shows are being staged in large marquees, with limits on numbers and track and trace arrangements. The Foodies Festival was cancelled completely, so too was the Military Tattoo.

If we are to enter into a brave new world after Covid where we value human and natural resources more carefully, then can I put in a plea for more government spending on the arts and sport. They are job-creating industries, like education and health, where there is no limit to what they can produce and which tread lightly on the Earth. Let's reach for a more creative future. Let's strive like our Olympic athletes and run with those chariots of fire along the beach at St Andrews.

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The Edinburgh International Festival has a new venue at Edinburgh Park convenient for Edinburgh Trams and bus services PHOTO ©2021 The Edinburgh Reporter



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