

Letter from Scotland

The Christmas lights have been switched on in Edinburgh, Dundee, Aberdeen, and Inverness. Glasgow will follow on Wednesday. And “Christmas villages” have sprung up in just about every city, town and tourist attraction. There’s even one at the battlefield of Culloden.

And will vaccine passports be required in more places\? No. On Tuesday the first minister Nicola Sturgeon stunned us all by flying in the face of all the official hints that the passport system would be extended beyond night clubs and football matches. Covid case numbers, she said, had stabilised and were even coming down. There are now fewer than 3,000 new cases a day, 700 in hospital and an average of 13 deaths a day.

She even announced a slight relaxation in the rules, allowing a recent lateral flow test to be counted instead of a double vaccination certificate. More young people are now vaccinated and 1.5 million of the most vulnerable people have now received a booster injection. But the government has also come under intense pressure from the hospitality industry not to deprive them of yet another Christmas season.

I don’t suppose Scotland would ever see riots over Covid restrictions – we don’t do that sort of thing – but we’ve seen how easily the mood can change in normally compliant countries like The Netherlands, Belgium and Austria.



Photo Ian Georgeson

The death of 27 migrants in the English Channel on Wednesday has made us all question what Britain is doing about refugees. The UK home secretary Priti Patel questioned if Scotland was doing enough to house asylum seekers, pointing out that only one of Scotland's 32 local councils – Glasgow – was participating in the UK government's refugee dispersal scheme.

So the UK Government rather than the Scottish Government, she said, was having to book hotels in Falkirk, Perth and Aberdeen to house some of the 23,000 asylum seekers who have attempted to cross the Channel this year.

But the councils have hit back at the Home Office saying they have not been given any extra funds to pay for hosting asylum seekers. And the private company engaged by the UK government, Mears, was ignoring local councils and local conditions. And, anyway, hotels are not the best places to accommodate large groups of asylum seekers.

Indeed SNP politicians are becoming increasingly annoyed by UK "interference in Scottish affairs." There's a long running row over UK government plans for a "free port" in Scotland. This week, we had an announcement of an air subsidy for flights between Dundee and London. And £10m for a hydrogen scheme on the wind-farm on Eaglesham Moor. Why, the SNP argue, are these decisions being made in London rather than in Edinburgh.

But Nicola Sturgeon put aside her political differences with the Conservatives to go on a joint visit to a drug rehabilitation project in Glasgow with the Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross. He's been highly critical of the Scottish government's handling of the drug crisis. We have the highest rate of drug deaths in Europe, 1,264 in 2019. And he wants the right to drug rehabilitation written

into law.

Ms Sturgeon, for her part, has promised that an extra £50m will be spent each year to tackle the problem. Interesting, both have argued that a test of official "injection rooms" should be part of the solution, but that is opposed by the UK government.

I'm happy to report that Stirling is the happiest place in Scotland. The finding comes for a survey of 21,000 people across the UK by the property company Rightmove. Its happiness index includes friendliness, community spirit, amenities, job opportunities, schools and green spaces. I'm less happy to report that my town Edinburgh came fourth after Perth and Inverness but above our big rival Glasgow which came seventh.

But even Stirling could only come sixth in the overall UK results. We were all outshone by the sweet little town of Hexham in the north of England where the average house price is a leafy £297,000, compared to Scotland's average of £194,000. This town of leather-workers has obviously come a long way since William Wallace burnt the place down in 1297. But next time I venture south of Hadrian's Wall, I hope a little of its happiness rubs off on me.