

The year of the new normal

We have come a long way since Christmas 2020 and we now find ourselves in a new world of vaccinations, cautious meetings, face masks and worries about our future on the planet.

Looking back on December last year, I can hardly believe I was there. Christmas was in hiding. No concerts, no cinema, no parties, only outdoor meetings with a few friends. My treat on Christmas Day was to climb Arthur's Seat.

We were entering our third Lockdown and the second year of the pandemic. 73,500 people had died of Covid across the UK, over 6,000 of them in Scotland. (Now it's over 125,000 and nearly 10,000 in Scotland). Then came the miracle of the vaccines and the military-style inoculation programme.

The government's furlough scheme kept 175,000 Scottish jobs alive (it had been nearly a million the year before). Government debt rose to 14 per cent of our national income, just short of the 15 per cent at the end of the Second World War.

The weather too was blowing between extremes. We had snow and ice at New Year. In February temperatures were down to minus 23°C in Braemar. Then we had our fourth hottest summer since records began in 1844. In Tyndrum the thermometer reached 27°C.

Abroad, forest fires were raging in California, Australia and Greece. More of Africa was turning into desert. Floods in

Germany and the Netherlands killed 180 people, many more in India and Bangladesh. The scene was set for the UN's latest climate change conference, in Glasgow, where yet again our leaders failed to notice there was an emergency on.

We have been getting used to a new normal in politics too. We are living with the damaging consequences of Brexit and "Boris being Boris" at Westminster. The SNP held onto power in the Scottish elections in May, in large measure because of Nicola Sturgeon's steady handling of the Covid crisis.

And on the sporting field, we have a new normal too. Scotland qualified for the football World Cup for the first time in over 20 years. Our men's rugby team beat England, France and Australia. Rangers FC are back on top of the Premier League, but plucky little St Johnstone from Perth snatched The Scottish Cup from them in an extraordinary penalty shootout.

To sum up this uncertain year in just one word, it has to be "timorous".