

Letter from Scotland

Where does Scotland stand at the beginning of census year 2022? We have come a long way since King Angus looked up into the sky before the battle at Athelstaneford in 832 and saw a Saltire formed by the clouds. So what is the “state of the nation” today?

We normally measure ourselves in the first year of each new decade but, because of Covid, the census was postponed. It will take place on 20 March. But this week we had a report from the Office of National Statistics forecasting that Scotland’s population will peak at 5.48 million in 2028 and then decline.



The original Saltire flag, Athelstaneford, East Lothian. A census, however, is not just about population numbers. They have always been “political”, in the sense that they take a snap-shot of the country being ruled. It was true of Julius Caesar’s census when he wanted to measure his tax-take from the Roman Empire. It was true of William the Conqueror’s Domesday Book in England. And it was true of Sir John Sinclair’s Statistical Accounts in Scotland between 1791 and 1799 when he set out to measure “the quantum of happiness”.

Modern censuses in Britain began in 1801, when Scotland’s population was 1.6 million. They’ve been held every decade since (except in 1941). This year’s Scottish census will be the most comprehensive ever and will be conducted mostly online. It’s 10 pages will include questions on: the number of people in the household on 20th March, their relationships, housing conditions, country of birth, “your feeling of nationality”, passports held, religion, educational

qualifications, work, travel, health, ability to speak Gaelic, sexual orientation and trans status.

The picture of Scotland that emerges will probably not surprise us, at least if we've been paying attention. And it will guide government policy and the general political debate for the next nine years. Scotland's birth rate has been declining for some time and our net inward migration will not make up for the number of deaths after the year 2028. The low birth rate will also mean our population is getting older, with all that means for the economy, the tax revenue and the care services.

But if we are trying to gage the "quantum of happiness" then we are starting the decade at a pretty low point. We enter 2022 with huge challenges: a quarter of our children living in poverty, the cost of energy doubling, a 4-10 per cent drop in national income due to Brexit, education and health services under-funded and under strain, the struggle to de-carbon and "learning to live with Covid."

The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon told parliament this week that we should now regard Covid as endemic not a pandemic. The virus is in the air around us and will not go away. Thankfully, we have the vaccine and the testing system to cope with it. The number of people being infected is stabilising, down to 8,000 a day, and, although hospital admissions are still rising (1,500 currently) that is expected to peak soon and deaths are down to about 20 a day. We also learned this week that around 40 per cent of patients classified as "Covid" are in hospital for other reasons, they also happen to have Covid.

This has allowed the government to ease some restrictions. From Monday, football and rugby crowds will be allowed back, just in time for the new football season and for the Six Nations rugby tournament. And from 24 January, it's likely that restrictions on numbers in theatres and concerts will be

lifted. The cut in quarantine time from 10 days to 7, introduced last week, will come as a welcome relief for hospitals, schools, train and ferry services where Covid-related absences have sometimes reached 20 per cent.



Prime Minister Boris Johnson at PMQs on Wednesday 12 January
PHOTO © UK Parliament/Jessica Taylor

Not everyone, of course, has been obeying the rules. Boris Johnson's staff party in Downing Street, at the height of Lockdown in 2020, has led to yet another embarrassment at Westminster. And to try to distance the Conservatives in Scotland from the scandal, their leader here Douglas Ross, has called on the Prime Minister to resign. That in turn has led to him being called "a lightweight" by the Leader of the House of Commons Jacob Rees-Mogg. As Gilbert and Sullivan might have sung, "Here's a pretty kettle of fish."

To try to restore a little dignity and a sense of national perspective, Buckingham Palace has announced a programme of events to mark the Queen's Platinum Jubilee Year. It will begin with a grand parade at Windsor Castle in May, followed

by a star-studded party (Covid compliant of course) outside Buckingham Palace on a special bank-holiday weekend, starting on Saturday 4 June. The next day, local communities will be encouraged to stage their own street-lunches. There will be the usual tree-planting, beacon-lighting and open days at the royal estates, including Balmoral.

And perhaps most revealing of all, school children will be invited to design flags outlining their hopes for the planet over the next 70 years. 200 of them will be paraded down the Mall to the Palace in a "river of hope".

And we sure need it.