

Letter from Scotland

Like our mistakes, pigeons have a habit of coming home to roost. In its 17th century heyday, my local doo'cot housed more than 2,000 pigeons, providing meat and fertiliser for Inch House Estate.

Nowdays, the estate is a housing estate and the pigeons are either feral or racing pigeons. But they still come home to roost.

We all make mistakes and much of England might be rueing the day they elected Boris Johnson as rime minister. In Scotland, his Conservative Party is split on the matter, and the leader Douglas Ross has spent the last week calling for Boris to go.

But what is happening in the Westminster bubble is the least of Mr Johnson's crimes. His real mistakes have been monumental and they are all coming back to haunt him: the death toll in the Covid pandemic, the under-funding of the NHS, the cuts to welfare causing poverty to soar, the Brexit disaster and the shortages it has brought, the failure to anticipate an inevitable rise in energy prices. This week inflation rose to 5.4 per cent, the highest rate for nearly 30 years, although food writer, Jack Monroe tweeted a long thread about the cost of living in which she warned it was far higher than that for families on low incomes. The thread is embedded below – and has now been viewed more than 15 million times.



Pigeons coming home to roost. Nether-Liberton Doocot, Edinburgh

But sometimes chancers win in life. And the Prime Minister has been dealt two powerful cards: the omicron variant appears to be much milder than previous infections, and the vaccination programme has been an astonishing success. So he has been able to lift most of the onerous Covid restrictions and, in Scotland, from Monday onwards, we will be following suit. The three-family rule for home gatherings is being scrapped, bar-service can resume in pubs, the limits on theatre and concert audiences are being lifted, as they have already for football and rugby matches. But mask wearing is still mandatory in shops, on public transport and in senior school.

Nicola Sturgeon has told parliament that we “turned the corner” in the first week of January. Covid cases have now stabilised at around 8,000 a day with 1,500 people in hospital

and 20 deaths a day. We had more figures this week showing that half of those admitted to hospital with Covid were there, primarily, for other reasons. Nevertheless, the pressure on the NHS has been severe, trying to tackle the backlog of operations built up during the last two years.

One of the puzzles of the pandemic has been how few jobs have been lost. There are now more Scots in employment now than there were before Covid. 75 per cent of all people between 16 and 64 have paid jobs and the unemployment rate has dropped to 3.6 per cent. This was not what the experts predicted when the government's furlough scheme came to an end. It may be, of course, that the new jobs are low-paid and part-time. And we are still seeing alarming headlines such as the 1,700 jobs being cut by the energy retailer Ovo in Perth, Edinburgh and Cumbernauld.

There is hope, though, for the economy in the future, as evidenced by the keen demand by companies for licences to build off-shore wind-farms. A total of 74 bids were received for 17 sites around the coast of Scotland, raising £700 million for the government. Opposition parties said the sale should have raised much more.

The Scottish transport secretary, Michael Matheson, has already outlined how he would like to spend the money. His 20 year plan includes: a light railway for Glasgow, a long-term fix for the A83 "landslide" road in Argyll, an improved road to the ferry at Stranraer, more cycle lanes and a bridge or tunnel to the Island of Mull. I wonder how many of these will ever be built. But we need to be ambitious.

The "Five Men in a Row" from North Berwick have certainly been ambitious. They have just rowed across the Atlantic in 36 days. They entered the Talisker Whisky Atlantic Challenge Race and came 3rd out of a flotilla of 36 entries. They endured 40ft waves and a rowing regime of two hours on, two hours off, to raise money for patients suffering the rare genetic disorder

Rett Syndrome.

Riding the music waves for the next fortnight are the 60 live shows performing in this year's "Celtic Connections" in Glasgow. The lifting of Covid restrictions has come almost in time for the opening concert this weekend but the organisers are well used to hybrid productions, in person and on-line.

I hope that this weekend is the last time I will have to "go" to a Burns Night on my computer. It's just not the same, eating haggis on your own and listening to the "Immortal Memory" on-line. And there's no wending your way home late at night wondering if you will encounter "witches and warlocks in a dance" and pigeons flying home to roost.

Jack Monroe's Twitter thread:

Woke up this morning to the radio talking about the cost of living rising a further 5%. It infuriates me the index that they use for this calculation, which grossly underestimates the real cost of inflation as it happens to people with the least. Allow me to briefly explain.

– jack monroe (@BootstrapCook) [January 19, 2022](#)