

Letter from Scotland

As our schools reach the half-term break, it's a good time to reflect on how hard the royal road to learning has been in the last two years. Around half of Scotland's 307,000 secondary pupils have missed at least ten per cent of their school time for Covid-related reasons. And when they are in school, they have had to wear masks in class, sit in cold rooms ("well ventilated" to use the jargon) and take regular lateral flow tests. Break times and meal times have had to be held in "prison yard" conditions (socially distanced it is called).

All of this was when the schools were actually open. There were times when they were closed for months and all learning went online (self home schooling, you might call it). Then there is the vexed issue of exams or assessments. This year national exams are returning, after two years in which teachers were trusted with assessing their own pupils.



Masked, disrupted, tested and examined. It's a tough life at school.

Some said it was a system of "exams by any other name". Others complained that teachers were too generous, and the pass rate in Highers did go up from 75 per cent in 2019 to 89 per cent in 2020. That was the year in which the Scottish Qualifications Authority tried to use its famous "algorithm" to down-grade some 125,000 results. There was such an outrage that the government had to intervene and ban any down-grading. The SQA has never recovered from that humiliation and it is now in the melting pot of an overall review of Scottish education.

So this year, the Education Secretary Shirley-Anne Somerville has said there will be no algorithm and pupils will be given "support aimed at helping reduce the stress" of returning to end-of-term exams. Apparently, some guidance is to be given in March as to the questions pupils are likely to face in their

exams in May. I wish them all the best.

Once again, however, I feel we have let our young people down. We have left them to bear the greatest burden of the pandemic to protect us older folk. We are indeed the selfish generation, riding on the hard work of the post-war generation and leaving future generations to pick up our bill for problems like an underfunded NHS, national debt and climate change.

The First Minister Nicola Sturgeon told parliament on Tuesday that we are entering a “calmer” phase of the pandemic and those scary daily Covid figures are no longer to be published at the weekends. The mask-wearing rules in schools are to be relaxed after the half-term holiday. The Health Secretary has said the NHS has “come through the worst” period in its 70 year history but Humza Yousaf also admitted it still faces significant pressures. The doctors themselves say they are “barely coping”, in the words of the British Medical Association. Although case numbers are falling to around 7,000 a day, there are still more than 900 Covid patients in hospital (and an average of 17 deaths a day), not to mention the huge backlog of non-Covid patients waiting for operations.

Just before the Scottish Parliament went on half-term break, MSPs approved the SNP/Green government’s £40 billion Budget. The Finance Secretary Kate Forbes gave it a final tweak, finding £290 million extra to tackle the “cost of living crisis”. Over 70 per cent of council tax payers will have £150 knocked off their bills and there will be a new £10 million fund for those in danger of having their gas or electricity turned off because of failure to pay. The money has come from the UK Government, though Kate Forbes insists it’s not new money.

A large part of the “cost of living crisis” could have been foreseen, namely the rise in the cost of energy. It was always going to get more expensive if we are to tackle climate

change. It's come as such a shock because we have not been phasing out oil and gas quickly enough and phasing in renewables. And this week the UK Government has continued this practice by giving permission for six new oil fields off the British coast, including Rosebank off Shetland. It's even bigger than the Cambo field, west of Shetland, which caused much controversy at the time of UN's climate change conference in Glasgow in November.

Finally, you may have noticed that Scotland beat England 20-17 last Saturday in the rugby international at Murrayfield. We face Wales in Cardiff this Saturday. The lucky "match ball" is being taken from Edinburgh to Cardiff by a 100 strong cycling team led by the former Scottish international Rob Wainwright. It's all in aid of the charity "My Name's Doddie", set up by the former rugby player Doddie Weir to tackle motor neuron disease. The peloton, which includes round-the-world cyclist Mark Beaumont and several stars from around the rugby world, set off on Thursday morning in challenging weather conditions.

I just hope they make it in time for kick-off.

<https://twitter.com/MNDoddie5/status/1491740587028066305?s=20&t=07ocI16VF2-Eo89CLvqxxw>