

Letter from Scotland

We woke on Thursday morning to the sleet and snow at the tailend of Storm Franklin and to the news that war had broken out in Europe again.

There is a small Ukrainian community here in Scotland and they have been staging protests outside the Russian Consulate on Melville Street. The invasion of their country has been condemned by all political parties here, and The Scottish Parliament promptly passed a motion expressing solidarity with the Ukrainian people.

The First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon, said the Russian invasion was “appalling and horrific” and she called for severe sanctions against the Putin regime. She said we were engaged in a battle between “oppression and autocracy on the one hand and freedom and democracy on the other.” The western world, she said, “must help and equip Ukraine to defend itself.”

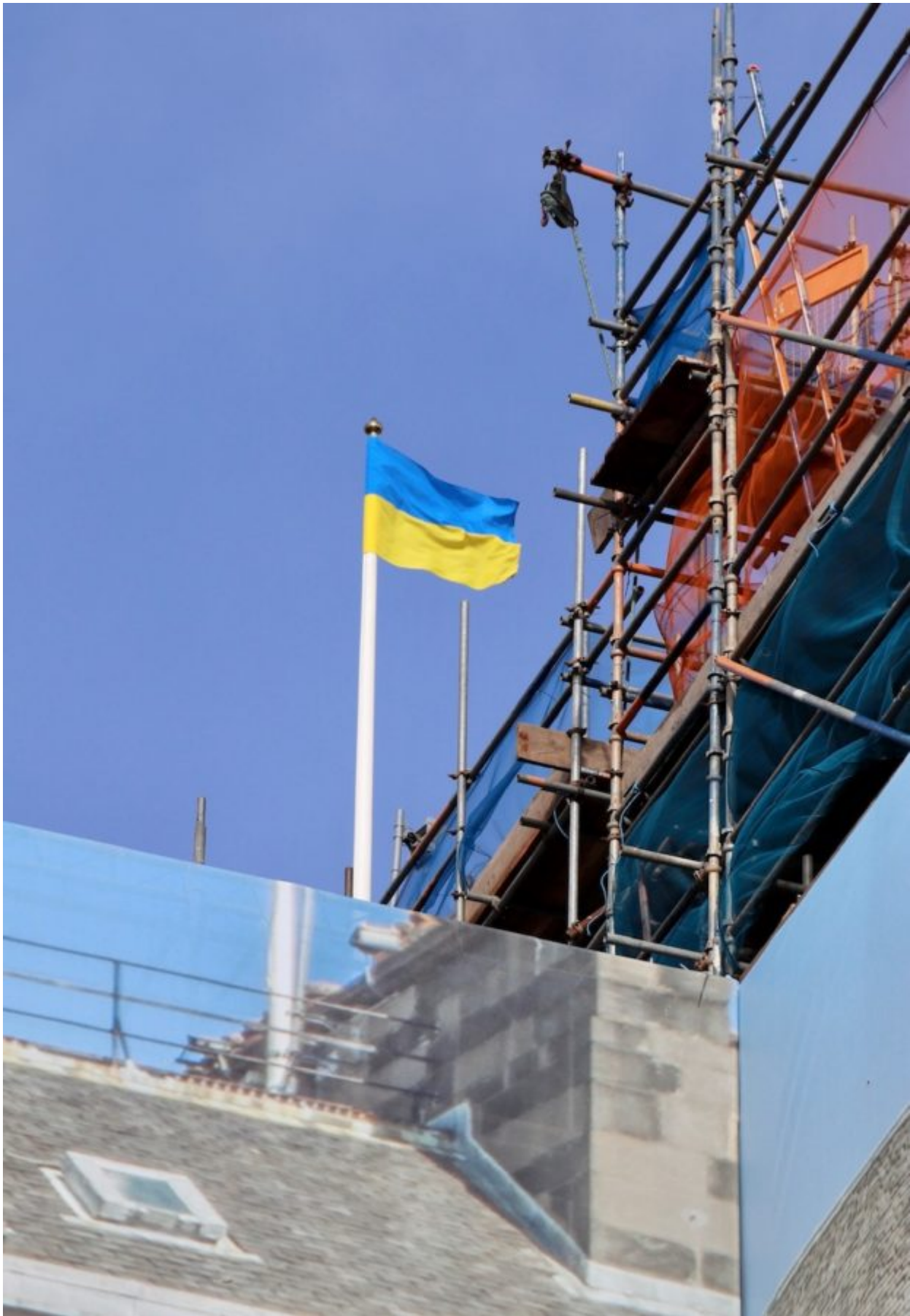


Arthur's Seat in Edinburgh feels the chill of winter and a cold war.

Like the rest of Europe, we are now bracing ourselves for the fall-out from the war in Ukraine: higher gas and oil prices, higher grain prices, a stream of refugees. The plight of Scots who have married and settled in Ukraine is being highlighted in the press. And our former First Minister, Alex Salmond, has been forced by public outrage to cancel his show on RT, the Russian state-sponsored television channel here in Britain.

To me, as part of the post-war generation, Putin's invasion of Ukraine has come as a tremendous shock. I thought that war waged over territory in Europe was a thing of the past. The dilemma we are now faced with is how to stand up to this latest mad dictator. Do we bomb the Kremlin in the hope of killing him? Do we release the "dogs of war" against him, with all the suffering and destruction that would involve? Do we

try to appease him by sacrificing Ukraine's freedom? Do we, as Ms Sturgeon suggests, impose the strictest sanctions against his regime and support anti-Putin movements inside Russia itself? I guess we are going to settle for the last option and hope for the best.



The Ukrainian flag flying high over the City Chambers 24 February 2022 Photo courtesy of Matt Donlan

The dreadful events in Ukraine have taken our minds off our

problems here at home, at least a little. Storm Franklin has brought heavy snow to parts of the Highlands and winds of up to 50mph across the Central Belt.

That in turn has taken our minds off Covid, at least a little.

On Tuesday Ms Sturgeon announced a new strategy for living with Covid. Youngsters between 5 and 11 years are to be offered vaccinations, and those over 75, will get another booster. Vaccine passports for entry to some venues are to be abolished from next week. School pupils are being allowed to remove their face coverings in class. And on 21 March, the legal requirement for everyone to wear face coverings in shops and on public transport will be dropped. Though, we are still to be urged to wear them voluntarily.

All this, of course, is way behind the relaxation of rules in England where all legal restrictions have already been abolished and free testing is being dropped from 1 April. This will relieve the UK Government of a £2 billion bill every month for issuing free testing-kits, and it leaves Scotland with the difficult choice of whether to continuing issuing free tests, paid for out of its existing health budget, or starting to charge for them (at around £12 for a pack of 5).

The curious thing is that, for all our caution, the number of Covid cases remains stubbornly high in Scotland, at about 7,000 a day, 1,000 in hospital, and around 15 deaths a day. And it's continuing to put a strain on the NHS. There's a huge backlog of operations, waiting times in accident and emergency departments are getting worse and a report out this week from the Auditor General said the current system of health care was not sustainable. There needs to be much better "workforce planning" (more doctors and nurses) and a real shift away from hospital treatment to care in the patient's own home.

All the trials and troubles of the week have made me almost forget the triumph of our curlers in the Olympic Games. Eve

Muirhead's team brought home the only gold medal for team GB and the Scots men's team won a silver.



Thomson's Tower

The news would have gladdened the heart of Rev John Thomson, whose small tower at the bottom of the manse garden at Duddingston Loch, beneath Arthur's Seat, was the place where the first rules of curling were written in 1804. It's a truly Scottish game.

Whether the Scotland v France rugby match at Murrayfield this weekend will be a truly Scottish game remains to be seen. But great sporting events like these remind us that our common humanity should be enough to push all wars and troubles into the past and allow us to lead peaceful, prosperous and happy lives.