

# Letter from Scotland

## Not everything is what it seems.

A week ago it looked as if spring had arrived. We'd had one of the sunniest Marches since records began, 30 per cent more sun than normal, and in Kinlochewe the temperature reached 20°C. Then on Wednesday night we had snow flurries and we're back in what we call "Baltic" weather, sunny but oh so cold.

Are we in spring or are we in winter, or both at the same time, as happens quite a lot in Scotland? It depends on your narrative of All Fools' Day. Is 1 April the beginning of spring or the end of winter?



Spring daffodils in Princes Street Gardens...but don't be fooled.

It's a "most ingenious paradox", as Gilbert and Sullivan would put it. And it occurred to me again and again this week, that we live in a world of conflicting narratives. Take the war in Ukraine for example. To most Russians, Putin's evil war looks like a defence of their country against a growing threat from the West. To us it is a case of a dictator gone mad, surrounded by sycophants, who is committing crimes against humanity by killing his neighbours in peace-loving Ukraine.

In the war against Covid, it looks as if we are winning, with most legal restrictions now lifted in Scotland. But we still have a high number of cases and over 2,000 people in hospital. That's why The Scottish Government announced on Wednesday that the law demanding we wear masks in shops and on public transport is to remain in place for another two weeks, till Easter Monday, 18 April when it will become advisory.

The narrative we're being given by experts and most politicians is that it's the least onerous measure to try to smooth the virus's latest wave, as it passes over us and floods the hospitals with record numbers of Covid patients. It's not just routine operations that are being delayed. This week, doctors in accident and emergency departments have been warning that waiting times are the worse since records began in 2006 and over 30 patients are dying each week as a result. Cancer patients are also suffering long delays for urgent treatment. Only 79 per cent of patients are being treated within the target of 62 days since referral.

The story on the "cost of living crisis" is that prices are going to rise dramatically over the summer (inflation up to 7 per cent ), largely because of increases in gas prices. But instead of moving away from gas quickly, both governments, in London and Edinburgh, are trying to mitigate the gas price rise with subsidies, which only encourages people to keep burning the stuff. Then they spin the anti-story, which is that we need to conserve energy and move on to renewables.

The debate on opening up new oil and gas fields around the Scottish coast has resurfaced this week, with the Ukraine crisis threatening supplies of Russian gas. Even though only 4 per cent of our gas comes from Russia, the oil companies are warning that we will have to import gas from somewhere unless they are allowed to drill for gas on the Scottish seabed. It's obviously given the Scottish government something to think about since it's put off publishing its energy transition strategy until the autumn.

There have been two contradictory stories told this week about the ferry boats being built at Ferguson's shipyard on the Clyde. There's Jim McColl's narrative, the one-time owner of the shipyard. He says the government agency CMAL, kept changing the design as the two ships were being built and that has caused a five year delay and the cost to more than double to a likely £250 million.

Then there is the government's version of events which says Ferguson Marine made a series of major construction errors. At First Minister's Questions on Thursday, Nicola Sturgeon was forced to deny that the contract was rushed through, without financial guarantees, to provide a good news story for the SNP conference in 2015. She said she was trying to save the yard from closure by allowing it to pioneer a new design of ferry which can run on either diesel or liquefied natural gas. In the end, she had to save the yard by nationalising it and she's now praying that both vessels will be in service by next summer.

This has been branded the "Year of Stories" by The Scottish Government, with events being staged up and down the country. This week it was the turn of the Edinburgh Festival to give us their story on what's to happen at this summer's event. It's to be a full-blown festival, unlike last year and the year before.

It will begin with a music, dance and light show at

Murrayfield Stadium on 5 August and end with an outdoor concert by the Philadelphia Orchestra on 28 August. The programme includes a dance version of The Jungle Book and a new Robert Burns show devised by Alan Cumming. There will also be plenty of shows highlighting the topical issues of refugees, migration and internationalism. But there will be no Russian companies, and perhaps no final firework display (although not yet confirmed). They do not fit our narrative this year.





Fergus Linehan (Festival Director). Edinburgh International Festival launch, Commercial Quay, Edinburgh, 30th March 2022 © 2022 J.L. Preece