



## New Monthly Newsletter

Welcome to my monthly newsletter which will give you an insight into the work I have been recently carrying out in my job as MSP for the Mid Scotland and Fife region.

Of course, everyone's lives have been affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and this has led to my constituency office being closed and my Parliamentary staff working remotely from home. My work pattern has also led to me working from home, taking part in 'virtual' Parliamentary meetings and spending some time in the Chamber at the Scottish Parliament. And the outbreak of Covid-19 has resulted in myself being appointed convener of the Covid-19 Committee.

The committee consists of nine MSPs – four from the SNP, two from the Scottish Conservatives and one each from Scottish Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens. The committee's main purpose is to scrutinise the Scottish Government's response to Coronavirus and it has already questioned Constitution Secretary Mike Russell on how the Scottish Government is dealing with the pandemic.

I hope you enjoy my e-newsletter.

## Testing Centre at Pitlochry



I was delighted to hear of the recent announcement that a mobile Covid-19 testing centre would be set up in Pitlochry.

Pitlochry is one of 13 pop-up mobile testing sites being run with the help of the Armed Forces, with the funding supplied by the UK Government.

Residents in Highland Perthshire will have welcomed this initiative, which was rolled out by the UK Government. It will help address the testing gap between Scotland and England. Recent figures showed that Scotland was still behind England with regard to testing so these mobile testing sites will go a long way to help matters.

Anyone eligible to have a test should book one online by going to the self-referral portals on either the UK or Scottish Government websites.

## **Murdo slams OVO energy after 'back-tracking' on jobs promise**



I was concerned to hear the recent announcement by OVO Energy that they would be seeking voluntary redundancies due to this affecting its operation in Perth.

OVO promised there would be no job losses when they took over the running of the

consumer department of Perth-based SSE in January. However, in mid-May they then said they would be shedding jobs and there were obviously major concerns for the Perth workforce – estimated to be around 1,000 people - who work at the energy firm's contact centre.

OVO blamed the impact of Covid-19 for its decision.

This is a very concerning time for staff working for OVO. I stressed that I would be seeking assurances from the management team that efforts would be made to keep as many jobs as possible in their Perth office.

OVO basically back-tracked on the promise they gave when they took over the running of the company in January that there would be no job losses. Obviously, many businesses throughout the country have been impacted by Covid-19 but this is a time when employers should be doing all they can to support their workforce, not threaten them with redundancy.

## Calls for UBI

# Universal Basic Income

With the UK Government now effectively paying the salaries of a large section of the workforce, thanks to the generosity of the Chancellor Rishi Sunak, it is not surprising that there have been calls in some quarters for the permanent introduction of a Universal Basic Income (UBI).

Last month, the think tank Reform Scotland published a paper proposing a UBI worth annually £5200 per adult and £2600 per child, picking up figures put forward by the Scottish Greens. The policy has won the support of the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who along with other SNP politicians is calling for its introduction by the UK Government as a response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The advocates of UBI claim that it would be preferable to the existing system of welfare benefits, removing the need for means testing, and as a result generating substantial savings in the administration of benefits.

The problem is that, despite its superficial attractions, there are major flaws in all the models for UBI that have been put forward. The biggest problem with any system of UBI is simply that of affordability.

For UBI to achieve its objective of providing a safety net for all individuals, it would have to be set at a sufficiently high level to cover all basic living costs, including those of housing. In effect, this would mean something close to the existing National Living Wage for a full-time working week.

At such a level, the costs would be astronomical, requiring eye-watering levels of personal taxation, particularly on middle and higher earners. Alternatively, if set at a lower rate, the level of UBI would be insufficient to provide the basic support that makes the notion attractive to its advocates.

That would still require the provision of additional top-up, and means-tested, benefits, and therefore the objective of simplicity in the welfare system would be lost entirely.

If UBI were attractive in supporting those in poverty, it might be thought that it would have the support of anti-poverty groups. However, think tanks such as the Centre for Social Justice and the Joseph Rowntree Foundation are united in opposing UBI, believing that it is not the answer to addressing poverty.

Indeed, it is the conclusion of the Joseph Rowntree Foundation that UBI schemes would actually increase poverty for children, working age adults, and pensioners, compared to the current tax and benefits system.

There is another reason why UBI should be opposed, and that is because it offends the basic belief that work is good for people. There is a long Scottish tradition that work is fulfilling, gives purpose to life, and is a reward in itself – an approach described by the German sociologist Max Weber as ‘the Protestant work ethic.’

As we have seen over the past few weeks with people becoming increasingly frustrated in lockdown, enforced idleness is not something most people enjoy, for any extended period. Workplaces are not simply locations housing wage slaves: they are environments where we interact with other human beings, socialise, and feel that our efforts are of value.

Even the most mundane jobs provide social benefits well beyond those available to individuals who are stuck at home unemployed, regardless of the financial rewards.

The question also has to be answered: if Universal Basic Income is such a good idea, why has nobody implemented it before now?

UBI is simply not a workable, deliverable, or cost-effective policy to be pursued. At best, it is a distraction from the important task that will face all governments at the end of this pandemic, of rebuilding economies and getting people back into meaningful work.

## The Lockdown

The term ‘the narcissism of small differences’ was coined by Sigmund Freud more than a century ago, to describe the concept that communities with a great deal in common are particularly prone to disagreement over minor matters of differentiation. According to the author Christopher Hitchens, ‘the deepest hatreds are manifested between people who – to most outward appearances – exhibit very few significant distinctions.’

It would be hard to conclude that this is an inappropriate term which would describe the distinct approaches being taken by the Scottish and UK Governments to relaxing the lockdown measures in place as a response to the Coronavirus pandemic.

The UK Government signalled an intention to move away from the previous messaging of 'Stay at home – protect the NHS – save lives' towards the more nuanced 'Stay alert – control the virus – save lives,' Nationalist politicians here seemed to have been infected by an outbreak of mass hysteria.

In a tweet indicating a certain lack of self-awareness, the SNP's Westminster leader Ian Blackford tweeted: "What kind of buffoon thinks of this kind of nonsense?" Fuelled by over-written newspaper headlines, there was an expectation in some quarters that the Prime Minister was about to announce a total abandonment of all lockdown measures, with the consequent risk of a second spike in Covid-19 cases.

When Boris Johnson made his address to the nation and then reported to the House of Commons a day later, it became clear that what was being proposed fell far short of what the more lurid headlines were suggesting.

What was actually being altered for people and businesses in England was that individuals unable to work from home could travel to their places of employment provided they could do so safely, and that greater freedom would be given to people to travel, and to exercise and play sports in the open air.

By this point, the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon had already announced her own relaxation of the rules in Scotland. Whereas previously we would only be allowed to leave our homes once a day to take exercise for up to 30 minutes, we are now permitted much more flexibility in the time we are allowed to be outside, and on the number of occasions we can do so in the course of a 24-hour period.

This did not stop the First Minister tweeting in Trump-style capital letters 'STAY HOME. PROTECT THE NHS. SAVE LIVES.'

Overhyped SNP complaints about confused messaging from the UK Government were left looking rather foolish when the First Minister herself was trying to simultaneously promote a 'Stay at Home' message whilst permitting people to leave their houses as often, and for so long, as they wanted.

That same afternoon, one Scottish tabloid newspaper ran an online headline stating: 'Nicola Sturgeon lifts lockdown restrictions in Scotland from tomorrow.' The headline was quickly removed, but the episode demonstrates the risks that all politicians face when their messages are interpreted by the media, not always to give the most accurate impression. What all these spats do is simply distract from what is actually going on in relation to the easing of lockdown, which is that the four nations of the United Kingdom are taking remarkably similar approaches to the situation, just as they did when lockdown was instituted some weeks ago.

There is danger that all political heat distracts attention away from much more serious issues in the Scottish Government's handling of the Coronavirus crisis. We have a dreadful situation



in care homes across the country, with infection rates of up to 73%.

There continue to be problems with access to PPE in the care sector. And the availability of testing, that vital component in a test, trace and isolate strategy, is substantially behind what is available south of the Border.

Political spats may make good headlines, but they don't always help provide clarity on what are vital issues. As all parts of the UK continue to grapple with this most serious public health crisis, we should be concentrating on how we can work together, not accentuating the differences between us.

## Scottish Government Transparency

Last week I called for full transparency on how the Scottish Government was making it's lockdown decisions, as the effects of ending the lockdown too soon or extending the lockdown for too long could have disastrous consequences. We need to know what information the Scottish government is using and how they have come to their decisions.

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