

Scottish Politics

Although the Inquiry is still in Edinburgh Michael Gove suddenly appears.

It turns out that he was the principal policy link with London.

He saw nothing particularly problematic with modest variations in pandemic policy provided it was not divergence for political advantage.

He had observed no real angst about the constitutional position getting in the way of effective action. The government had chosen to take the public health route rather than the more draconian civil contingencies route which would have given UK ministers greater powers and control over civil society.

He thought that the links between the centre and devolved administrations had, by and large, worked well. He had always understood that the Scottish government would not give up their principal

political objective of independence, which was a fact of political life. [*In her later evidence Nicola Sturgeon was to claim that during the pandemic all her decisions were made on public health not political grounds*].

Gove acknowledged that he and colleagues found it irritating when from time-to-time Nicola Sturgeon jumped the gun in briefing the media following discussions that were meant to be confidential.

That was politics as was her need from time to time to give decisions a clearly Scottish flavour.

The trouble with Mr Gove is that one is always asking whether his apparent reasonableness and common-sense approach is just clever politics.



The Scottish Cabinet Minister for Health for much of the pandemic appears next.

Like others she is pressed hard on the deletion of WhatsApp messages.

She admits that she was not the most technically gifted member of the Scottish parliament.

It turns out the four Health ministers in the UK talked once a week.

Early consideration was, she claimed, given to the challenges presented to care homes. Although transfers from hospitals did present problems for some care homes [but not all] one had to remember that hospitals were dangerous places for vulnerable patients.

The risk of infection seemed to be linked significantly more to the size of the care home.

Kate Forbes the finance minister talks the Inquiry through the complex funding of pandemic

response measures which involved negotiation with UK Treasury ministers and changes to the deployment of Scottish budgets.

There were problems when Scotland took different lockdown decisions to the rest of the UK which were not mirrored by Treasury funding.

“Eat Out to Help Out” was directly funded by the UK Treasury and widely welcomed by the hospitality industry in Scotland even though it carried the risk of increased covid transmission.

She has always sought to have a constructive relationship with colleagues in London but that did not stop her arguing for Scotland.

This was detailed, informed and thoughtful evidence. If she stays in Scottish politics she has the potential to be a future leader.

Jamie Dawson KC, who is the polished lead Counsel for this section of the Inquiry, presses Humza Yousaf, now First Minister, on his reasons for deleting WhatsApp messages.

He makes little progress other than an acknowledgement that it

had happened. In his role as Health Minister our witness claims that he had been the one to press colleagues to “go faster and harder.”

He thought that the difficult decision to allow the Murrayfield football match to go ahead had been the right one at the time although the First Minister [Sturgeon] had been very concerned about it and asked a lot of questions, many of which could not be answered.

There were many difficult decisions including cancelling non-emergency surgery.”

The hip replacement that Mrs Smith needed would deteriorate further if she had to wait another year” was but one example.

He regretted his reference, in a private email exchange with a colleague, in which he accused the Scottish

Police Federation of being “arrogant and retrograde” in their attitude to enforcing pandemic regulations.

He had been venting his personal frustration.

Thoughtful evidence but it reinforces the view that Nicola Sturgeon made most of the Covid decisions.

Nicola Sturgeon gives clear but at times emotional evidence. She handles the questions as you would expect a lawyer would.

Careful, well prepared, and always anticipating the next question.

As expected she is pressed hard on the deletion of her WhatsApp messages but gives no ground.

Openness and transparency were, she claimed, fundamental concepts in the operation of the Scottish government.

The killer question never came.

Did you and your colleagues delete these messages because they might be embarrassing if ever disclosed to a public inquiry?

Perhaps even more specific because they might disclose the political

machinations behind the scenes?

Throughout this evidence Ms Sturgeon sticks to her guns.

The pandemic decisions were made, she insisted, solely on the basis of what was best for the health of the people of Scotland.

But was this possible... challenged Counsel, by a strong-minded minister whose whole political life had been focused on Scottish independence and when pandemic policies were largely based or guided by her instincts?

Other witnesses had claimed that on occasion grievances were manufactured or policy variances decided in a way that would reinforce a view that pandemic decisions about Scotland were better made in Scotland by the SNP.

The pandemic in Scotland would be managed better than it was in England.

She strongly rejected this view. Independence had she claimed been far from her mind during the pandemic which had been very demanding and stressful.

Independence policy work had been suspended during the pandemic.

Her government had not got everything right.

They perhaps should have locked down earlier and everybody had much to reflect about and learn from their management of social care.

The resignation of Dr Calderwood, a long-time colleague, after breaking covid rules had been a blow but her team had adjusted quickly to fill the gap.

She had, she claimed, led from the front and like any good Chief Executive [because that is how she acted] demanded evidence to support decisions that would have an enormous

impact on the people of Scotland. She would not accept the view of one Scottish local government leader that decision making had been too centralised and that every decision was made through the optic of politics.

There is little doubt that these decisions weighed heavily on her.

She did not hide this in her evidence. She did seek extensive advice but was difficult to argue with.

Was hubris in play after so many years in power... probably?

Alister Jack the Scottish Secretary the final witness in this session, was clear in his evidence that in his view politics had been in play in much of the Scottish management of the pandemic.

He sometimes thought that Scottish ministers saw Scotland as a land apart from the rest of the UK.

He explained that lockdown support funding decisions had to be made on a national UK basis.

If Scotland had different allocations to match their local decisions the other

devolved governments would demand the same as would Andy Burnham for Manchester and Andy Street for Birmingham.

It would be chaos. He would support a much stronger connection between the UK government and the devolved administrations if another pandemic occurred.

The Inquiry will make a judgement about how well the people of Scotland fared and whether a stronger UK focus might have produced better outcomes.

For what it is worth..

... I conclude that the Scottish government did their best in challenging

circumstances.

Independence politics may have been in play in the background but was never at the centre of pandemic decision making.

Wales next at the end of February.
