

Leave lockdown in lockstep

I believe that when Scotland is ready to emerge from lockdown we should do so in lockstep with the UK as a whole.

There are strong, practical reasons why this should happen.

It's important, as Scotland's two governments make such onerous, difficult demands on people to stay at home and to stay away from family and friends, that we speak with the same voice.

If we can present a simple, clear, united message, it will be much more effective.

The more we feel we are in this together, the more we will pull together – to stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives.

A UK-wide approach will also be best for Scottish businesses.

It will help our economy recover as strongly as possible. It will help save as many jobs as possible.

We are, after all, part of the UK economy.

Sixty per cent of Scotland's trade is with the rest of the UK and as we begin to ease restrictions our businesses will need a level playing field to compete.

So I'm in no doubt that moving forward as one United Kingdom will save lives and save livelihoods.

I'm glad to say that the UK Government and the Scottish Government are in agreement on that broad principle.

Nicola Sturgeon has acknowledged the advantages of taking a UK-wide approach to tackling coronavirus.

She has spoken consistently of the benefits of working together, of the UK remaining in alignment.

We've both made the point that coronavirus does not respect borders and the First Minister has been clear it would be wrong for the Scottish Government to issue different guidance 'just for the sake of it'.

That's a sentiment I welcome.

Devolution, rightly, gives the Scottish Government a key role in responding to the coronavirus outbreak.

But the ability to do things differently, which is central to devolution, does not, and never has, meant that things must be done differently or are best done differently.

The coronavirus pandemic is a national emergency and has created an unprecedented challenge for the whole of the UK. We should meet the challenge together.

Up to now there have been some differences in approach, though most have been minor.

But where differences have been more substantial, the Scottish Government have not made good decisions.

Using Scotland's share of extra UK Government funding for business support, they created a system that put many firms at a huge disadvantage compared with south of the border.

Even now – after a U-turn forced by an outcry among businesspeople and pressure led by Scottish Conservative leader Jackson Carlaw – levels of support for the hard-hit retail, hospitality and leisure sector falls well short of what's on offer in England.

The Scottish Government has also failed to justify their decision to shut down all building sites apart from hospitals.

South of the border the advice is to continue to go to work, but only where it can be done safely and where you are unable to work from home.

Here, the Scottish Government have decreed no building site can be operated safely. They have not explained why – but we do know the decision is having a disastrous impact on the Scottish building industry.

I applaud businesses, such as the famous shortbread baker Walkers, on Speyside, who used a brief shut down to figure out safe working practices and who are now back up and running as best they can.

They know they must do everything they can to keep their businesses going and so protect the jobs and livelihoods of their workforces. This can only be done if they maintain their share of the market in the UK and further afield.

Our vitally important Scotch Whisky industry has also been at its innovative best to design safe ways of working.

They've not only continued to produce and bottle our national drink, they have provided huge quantities of badly-needed hand sanitiser to keep frontline health and care workers safe.

Their effort is a very neat example of protecting people and protecting the economy at the same time.

Let me be clear, we are not yet at the point where we are able to start 'unlocking' our society, because we have not yet met our five tests. For now, everyone needs to continue to stay at home, protect the NHS and save lives. But I am equally clear, when the data shows we can start easing the restrictions we are all currently living with, it will be important to do so as one United Kingdom.