

SNP plan to empty jails would see more than 11,000 dodge prison

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6 Sep 2017



More than 11,000 criminals – including those convicted of homicide, attempted murder and serious assault – would escape jail under the SNP's new justice plans.

Yesterday, Nicola Sturgeon said she wanted sheriffs to stop handing down sentences of less than 12 months to boost rehabilitation.

However, analysis by the Scottish Conservatives has revealed the new measures would see thousands of serious criminals instead handed fines or community sentences.

In 2015/16, the most recent timeframe for which statistics are available, 11,195 offenders were sentenced to 12 months or less.

That included two convicted of homicide, 109 of serious assault or attempted murder, and 82 of robbery.

In addition, 27 people convicted of sexual assault were sent down for under a year, in addition to 285 housebreakers and 334 found guilty of handling an offensive weapon.

As it stands, courts are instructed to have a presumption against sentences of less than three months.

Last month, think tank Reform Scotland said this should be extended to six months.

Yesterday, as part of her Programme for Government, the First Minister said it was her intention to increase that even further.

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Liam Kerr said:

"The SNP is creating an impression that this change will only really impact low-level offenders whose rehabilitation would be better served with alternative punishments.

"But the reality is it will see certain offenders convicted of homicide, serious assault, attempted murder and sexual assault escape a jail term.

"That's a shocking way to treat victims of crime, and will do nothing to help rehabilitation.

"Prison is meant to do four things; punish, deter, keep the public safe, and rehabilitate.

"With these proposed changes, the Scottish Government is utterly neglecting all but one of these.

"If ministers are serious about rehabilitation, they should ensure prisoners are compelled to work or undertake education while inside, instead of trying to empty prisons."

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Giving patients in deprived areas longer GP appointments could help reduce health inequalities, the Scottish Conservatives have said.

The idea will be among several looked at by a new Health Advisory Board assembled by the party.

The expert panel was unveiled today in Edinburgh by leader Ruth Davidson and shadow health secretary Miles Briggs.

Earlier this year, following calls from the Scottish Conservatives, ministers agreed an additional £250 million in funding for general practice.

Decisions on how that will be spent are yet to be taken, but one suggestion the panel will look at is the possibility of providing longer appointments for patients in less wealthy areas.

The health inequality gap in Scotland is well-documented, with those in more deprived parts significantly more likely to suffer from a range of illnesses, with a far lower life expectancy.

Studies have shown the more time a patient spends with a GP, the less their health will deteriorate, and the fewer appointments they will need in future.

The proposal is supported by the Royal College of GPs, who said: "RCGP believes that longer appointments are invaluable for improving the quality of care all patients can receive ... Those in areas of health inequality, be they

in urban or in rural areas, need their GP more often than most and to provide an adequate service the funding must be put in place."

Scottish Conservative shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said:

"Extra money for general practice is something the Scottish Conservatives have demanded for some time.

"Now it's been agreed, we need to talk about how that is going to be spent.

"We believe one area worth looking at is longer appointments for patients in poorer areas who we know are more likely to suffer from a range of illnesses.

"Even extending the time they spend with a doctor from 10 minutes to 15 minutes could make a huge difference for their health and wellbeing.

"Of course, GPs are already under immense pressure, and this is something that would require good planning and additional funding.

"But this is the sort of discussion we have to have, and this Health Advisory Board will do exactly that."

The Health Advisory Board was launched by the Scottish Conservatives in Edinburgh today.

Studies have shown longer appointments for patients in deprived areas could reduce health inequalities:

<http://www.pulsetoday.co.uk/news/commissioning/commissioning-topics/long-term-conditions/longer-gp-appointments-highly-cost-effective-finds-major-study/20032134.article>

On the prospect of longer appointments, the Royal College of GPs is supportive:

"RCGP believes that longer appointments are invaluable for improving the quality of care all patients can receive. Such benefit could be realised across a host of patient circumstances, from those people who have a mental health component to their consultation to those who present with a relatively minor concern as a means to opening up a more substantial issue with their GP.

"If we are to achieve that time for GPs to spend with patients then we need to see substantial increases in funding for general practice to 11% of the NHS Scotland budget, reversing the decade worth of cuts to the percentage share the service has received and permitting a radical increase in GP numbers such as that promised in England.

"Those in areas of health inequality, be they in urban or in rural areas, need their GP more often than most and to provide an adequate service the funding must be put in place."

Below are the members taking part on the new Health Advisory Board:

Dr Chris Kidson – Paediatric Consultant, Royal Hospital for Children, Glasgow
Dr Neil Dewhurst – Former President of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh

Andrew Robertson – Former Chair of NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde

Erin McIlveen – General Surgery Specialty Trainee, West of Scotland

Johnathan Laird MRPharmS (IPresc) – Director of PharmacyinPractice.scot and member of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society Scottish Pharmacy Board

Dr Katharine Morrison – General Medical Practitioner, Ayrshire

Dr Belinda Hacking – Division of Clinical Psychology Scotland, British Psychological Society

Norman Provan – Associate Director, Royal College of Nursing Scotland

Emma Currer – National Officer for Scotland, Royal College of Midwives

Ruth responds to SNP's Programme for Government

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5 Sep 2017



Ruth Davidson has issued her response to the SNP's Programme for Government, which opens the door for tax hikes and could see thousands of serious offenders avoid jail.

The Scottish Conservative leader said there were some policies set out today on which the party would support ministers, but that the people of Scotland have now put the SNP government "on probation".

She criticised Nicola Sturgeon for hinting at tax increases at a time when Scotland is already the highest-taxed part of the UK.

Setting out the challenges facing the funding of public services, the First Minister told MSPs: "The time is right, in my view, to open a discussion about how responsible and progressive use of our tax powers could help build the kind of country we want to be."

Ms Sturgeon also said she wanted sheriffs to stop issuing jail sentences of 12 months or less; the current presumption is against jail terms under three months.

However, it was confirmed that Frank's Law – which secures free personal care for those with conditions like dementia and happen to be under the age of 65 – will go ahead.

Both Ruth and shadow health secretary Miles Briggs have campaigned on this topic for years.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

"If the Scottish Government is to earn back the trust and respect of people in Scotland, which it has squandered in the last year, then it must change – and change fast.

"It must show it understands the difference between a genuine complaint and the politics of endless grievance.

"It must accept responsibility for all its record in Scotland – and fix the mistakes it has made.

"Given what we know of this Scottish Government, we will wait to see whether today's warm words are backed up by action before making a judgement.

"But the SNP should know this – after this last year, it is on probation with people in Scotland."

On the prospect of tax rises:

"Because of the new financial powers, Scotland needs to raise closer to what it spends.

"Dragging Scotland down with ever more punitive taxes is not the way to do this.

"The First Minister is opening the door on greater tax rises today.

"We say stop taking ever more money from the pockets of Scotland's workers – we must instead go for growth."

On the presumption against sentences of less than 12 months:

"Nicola Sturgeon seeks to play down sentences of 12 months or less.

"Right now, 17 per cent of all offenders done for attempted murder or serious assault received a sentence of less than 12 months. More than a quarter of all sex offenders are given jail terms of less than 12 months.

"We see the need in many areas for criminals to be taken off the streets, and we see that nowhere greater than in domestic abuse cases.

"Judges use short sentences to show repeat offenders causing misery in their community with low-level crimes time and time again that their actions have consequences.

"That option should not be removed."

On Frank's Law:

"I am genuinely pleased to see the inclusion of Frank's Law in today's programme.

"It is absolutely a policy whose time has come – Scots who need care should not be divided by an arbitrary line of age.

"I pay tribute to Amanda Kopel who has campaigned for this on behalf of her late husband Frank for years and with such amazing dignity and strength.

"If the First Minister wishes to expedite this so we can get this in and working on the ground as soon as possible, I believe she will have the whole chamber's support. She will certainly have mine."

NHS vacancies hit new high

5 Sep 2017



The number of nursing and consultancy vacancies in Scotland has reached a record high, new figures have revealed.

ISD Scotland analysis has shown 5.2 per cent of nursing and midwifery posts are now vacant – the equivalent of more than 3200 jobs.

Health visitors and paediatric services have the highest rates, with many having lain empty for more than six months.

It is also the first time ever nursing and midwifery vacancy rates have breached the five per cent mark.

In addition, the 8.5 per cent vacancy rate among consultants is the highest since figures began being published in 2007.

Nearly half of those have been vacant for more than six months, while some disciplines – like clinical radiology – have vacancy rates of almost 15 per cent.

The statistics put more pressure on the SNP, which has been consistently criticised for its stewardship of the NHS over the last decade.

The increase in vacancies means more money has to be spent on expensive bank and agency nurses, with many wards being left under-staffed.

Today, ISD Scotland also revealed that 8.2 per cent of operations were cancelled last month, with a shortage of staff and resources often blamed for

the cancellations.

Scottish Conservative shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said:

“This is a problem created by the SNP, which continually gets worse.

“In an organisation the size of the NHS, there will always be a certain number of vacancies.

“But this now accounts for thousands of nurses, midwives and consultants.

“The consequence of that is a huge reduction in the standard of care offered to patients, and a miserable existence for staff left over to pick up the slack.

“Nothing the SNP government is doing to address this appears to be working.

“The nationalists have been in charge of health for a decade, and in that time have presided over failure.

“It’s time for a proper explanation as to why this has been allowed to happen.”

To see the full report, visit:

<https://www.isdscotland.org/Health-Topics/Workforce/Publications/2017-09-05/2017-09-05-Workforce-Report.pdf>

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4 Sep 2017



The SNP is still playing catch up on the 2016 Programme for Government, days before it is set to announce another one for the year ahead.

Analysis by the Scottish Conservatives has revealed less than a quarter of the bills proposed this time last year have been passed.

Nicola Sturgeon said in the 2016 programme that she wanted to pass bills on

vital issues like domestic abuse, child poverty, housing and social security.

However, just three were passed before Holyrood stopped for recess in June – bills on air passenger duty, railway policing and childhood abuse.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson has urged the SNP to use the opportunity of the coming year to make use of the Scottish Parliament's powers.

Last week, Ruth outlined her plan to resolve Scotland's housing crisis, with a new generation of new towns.

In the coming weeks, the party will also set out ideas on the NHS and on economic growth.

It will also back calls for an Education Bill, Frank's Law – to allow under 65s with conditions like dementia to receive free personal care – and moves to introduce whole life sentencing.

Bills on local government funding, business rates and planning should also be considered in the year ahead, she added.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

"People in Scotland have given all political parties a very clear message – to get back to the day job and focus on the things that really matter.

"As Holyrood returns to business this week, we are focused on exactly that.

"It's time to dump the endless debate about independence, and put the focus back on the forgotten issues.

"Scotland cannot afford a repeat of last year's Programme for Government, when the SNP set out a range of ideas, but delivered on hardly any.

"Even without the upcoming programme, ministers would still be playing catch up on last year.

"We need to build more homes, recruit more teachers and get our economy back in the fast lane.

"A Scottish Conservative government would be focusing on these priorities in a programme for government this week, and we urge the SNP to follow suit.

"The constitution is now in the past. The future is about providing a better deal for Scotland as we move forward."

Bills promised in the 2016 Programme for Government:

- Air Passenger Duty Bill
- Child Poverty Bill

- Contract (Third Party Rights) Bill
- Domestic Abuse Bill
- Expenses and Funding of Civil Litigation Bill
- Forestry Bill
- Gender Balance on Public Boards Bill
- Islands Bill
- Housing (Amendment) Bill
- Limitation (Childhood Abuse) Bill
- Railway Policing Bill
- Social Security Bill
- Wild Animals in Circuses Bill

Three Bills were passed:

Air Departure Tax Bill, Railway Policing Bill, Limitation (Childhood Abuse) Bill