

Education must be the top priority

15 August 2017

This week marks two years since I became Scottish Labour leader. Three elections, a referendum on the EU and the near constant campaign around the constitution in Scotland has been packed into that time – now it's time to take a breath and focus on what really matters.

I made education my top priority when I became Labour leader because I believe the transformative power it can have on people's lives. Giving people the skills they need to compete for the jobs of the future will cut the levels of poverty that scar our communities and grow our economy.

One of the first headline policies I announced as leader was a Fair Start Fund – extra funding for each of the poorest pupils in our primary schools, paid directly to head teachers.

Sound familiar? The SNP adopted the policy and rebranded it the 'pupil equity fund'.

I'm all for the SNP government taking Labour's advice when it comes to closing the gap between the richest and the rest. The problem is SNP ministers copied our policy – but not how to pay for it.

Labour would introduce a 50p top rate of tax on the richest to fund this extra investment in our young people – instead the SNP took it from central funding.

That is central funding for schools that has already been hammered by £1.5 billion of cuts since 2011. It is the definition of giving with one hand and taking away with the other.

The Scottish Parliament has the powers to do things differently now. Thanks to the new powers over tax delivered by the Vow there is no excuse for the Scottish Government to fail to give our schools the investment they need.

This week Labour's summer campaign, For The Many, adopts a 'Back to school' theme, as we highlight our plans to reform and increase investment in education. We'll highlight the SNP's failures too.

It's more than two years since Nicola Sturgeon took to the pages of the Daily Record to declare she had a 'sacred responsibility to ensure every young person has the same chance to succeed'.

Big words, but the numbers don't add up. The percentage of spending going to education and skills since the SNP has come to office has fallen, as it has pushed down the list of priorities for public spending.

In fact the SNP currently plan to spend more money cutting tax for frequent flyers than they plan to spend closing the attainment gap in our classrooms.

In 2016 the SNP lost its majority in the Scottish Parliament, and in 2017 it lost its direction.

Ministers can't bulldoze their plans through parliament anymore. They have to work with other parties.

That's why, I'll be making the case in parliament to push Labour ideas through on education.

Nicola Sturgeon promised Scots she was going to make education her top priority. I'm going to make her keep that promise.

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Kez Dugdale is the Scottish Labour leader. This article first appeared in the Daily Record on 15 August 2017.