

End Division. No Referendum. Rebuild Scotland.

26 Feb 2021



I wanted to start today by talking about the crisis engulfing Scotland.

An internal party civil war is running out of control, taking down our country with it.

The SNP are dragging down the reputation of the Scottish Parliament and our treasured institutions.

I can only imagine what people abroad are thinking when they look to Scotland today and see the state of our nation.

The Crown and Parliament at war.

Scandals and sleaze dominating the corridors of power.

A great country split in two, increasingly divided against itself, broken apart by the SNP.

A Scotland they don't recognise, with leaders past and present who are not genuine, sincere or honest.

The state of our nation is not healthy.

But while that fundamental issue of trust in government means so much to our democracy,

I know that for many people just now, the more pressing and understandable concern is when they will get to see their loved ones again.

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The Scottish Government's revised framework for lifting lockdown restrictions should have answered these questions, but it didn't.

Last Friday, my party published a paper setting out the key questions the public expected answered by the First Minister this week.

What the steps out of lockdown and to the end of restrictions are.

Whether we will continue with a national or go back to a local approach.

In what order restrictions will be removed.

How progress with the vaccination programme will affect restrictions going

forward.

And finally, what is the 'new normal' that the Scottish Government is seeking to reach.

They are not hypothetical questions, they are the real points of clarity that individuals, families and businesses need to allow them to plan for their future.

But the First Minister's route map, if it could even be called that, was incomplete – it only answered two of those points.

It did set out that we will move to a local approach if possible.

But the Scottish Government's framework poses new questions around 'local' potentially not meaning council areas as before but instead larger regions.

Then it did answer how the vaccination programme will affect restrictions and the answer according to the timeframe set out in this revised framework is, it won't.

We have vaccinated over a third of the adult population and all vulnerable groups. A fraction that will only increase.

With vaccines that have been shown to reduce the risk of hospitalisation from coronavirus by 85% and 94%.

Dramatically reducing the threat of this virus to so many people.

Yet the First Minister says that this should have no impact on restrictions until the end of April.

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Most importantly this is not a route map.

The framework does not show us the steps that we will take to end restrictions.

It is at best a holding document;

the Scottish people are being told to wait and see what comes next.

They've been given little hope, even less clarity and we don't have a full plan to get out of this.

The Scottish Government cannot even promise that the next framework in mid-March will be a full route map out of restrictions either.

We do not even know when we will have a plan to end restrictions, let alone when the restrictions themselves will end.

We also have no idea in what order restrictions will be lifted after the 26th

of April,

Will we see multiple households being able to meet indoors before non-essential travel outside of council areas.

Nicola Sturgeon has said a lot about her not being able to give dates, but she is using this as a straw man.

She is not being asked for dates, she's being asked for a plan.

Even in October, we knew what Level 0 the lowest level of restrictions looked like, even if no part of Scotland ever reached it.

Now we have no idea what restrictions we will continue to face in Scotland even after all adults have received the vaccine.

The Scottish public were looking for a full plan,

they were looking for a future after coronavirus,

they were looking for hope.

Yet the First Minister has given them none of this.

After eleven long and difficult months of restrictions and two lockdowns, the Scottish people are tired.

The most important tool we have in tackling this virus isn't restrictions, it isn't testing, it isn't even the vaccination programme.

It's public compliance,

the willingness of the Scottish people to keep following the rules, to protect each other.

Individuals,

families

and businesses across this country have made heroic sacrifices in following the guidance to the letter.

My concern is that this approach, of repeatedly shutting off any light at the end of the tunnel, is testing that compliance to its absolute limit.

The Scottish Government should never forget the immense impact of these restrictions on people's finances, their relationships, their mental health.

And never take for granted the sacrifices so many have made.

I also have concerns with other specific parts of this framework.

It sets out that schools are not due to return in full until the 5th of April.

Parents will have been home schooling their pupils with patchy support in online learning for over three months at that point.

Yet the Scottish Government suggests a return on the first day of the Easter Holiday. In the full knowledge that this means the 19th in reality.

Firstly, it is frankly insulting to parents that they are suggesting that schools will return during a holiday.

Is there not a single person in the Scottish Government that realised the date they had chosen was when most schools were closing for a fortnight?

And secondly if schools are the priority then I cannot believe that this is the timeframe that they are working towards.

We need to see every action taken to ensure that children can return to school sooner,

we cannot allow children's education to suffer for longer than it needs to.

Then there is the support for businesses as we lift restrictions.

The only commitment that we got from the Scottish Government on further support for business is that they will receive an additional payment from the Strategic Framework Fund after restrictions are lifted.

That is the bare minimum change that they could have made,

it does not address the fact that the amounts paid out from the fund are not enough for so many businesses

Or that travel restrictions in one part of the country can have a major impact on businesses in another.

I've been beating this drum for months.

My party has made repeated calls for reform and simplification of the business grants scheme

and for the size of payments to be increased.

It is incredibly disappointing that the Scottish Government has again decided to treat our economy as an afterthought.

Which leads me on to the cross-border travel arrangements.

The framework makes no plan for when families spread across the UK can be reunited.

Or when travel can resume across the border for work and tourism.

The First Minister knows how important cross-border travel is,

yet families and businesses continue to be kept in the dark on when they can

legally cross it for non-essential purposes.

This uncertainty needs to be ended now and the border stopped being treated differently from travel within Scotland.

Finally, there is the effect this all has on the Scottish Parliament Election.

The First Minister has been adamant that this election will take place on the 6th of May and I agree that we should do all we can so that it can happen on this date.

But it is the responsibility of the Scottish Government to reassure the opposition that a fair election can take place on the 6th of May.

The subject of elections leads me on to tomorrow's result of the campaign for the leadership of Scottish Labour

and the position both of the candidates have taken on Scotland's place in the United Kingdom.

There are millions of people across Scotland right now, many of whom would never say that they were Conservatives, that they support the UK Government or describe themselves as unionist.

Some of them may have voted Yes in 2014 and would do so again.

But all of them share the same view that an independence referendum during and as we rebuild from the coronavirus pandemic is the wrong priority for our country.

They recognise that things cannot just go back to normal after the worst of the health crisis is over because then we will be in a deep economic crisis.

They want the focus to be on our recovery, on rebuilding our public services and on creating jobs.

On bringing people together to face the massive challenges that are in front of us right now.

They are dismayed that the SNP are intent on division

and are putting their political priority above the national interest.

That they cannot read the room.

People have been told to pause their lives, the things they value, because of the pandemic,

Yet this SNP Government is happy to give rules to others

but does not seem to want to follow its own instructions.

With Nicola Sturgeon announcing her full route map to a divisive independence referendum,

a month before we got a partial route map to take us out of lockdown.

And last weekend, the SNP proudly promoting that they will be spending £600,000 on referendum preparations this year.

This is not by any measure a government focusing 100% on the pandemic.

In this coming election, many people aren't looking for clever policy, or a fundamental overhaul of how our country is run.

They just want to stop this drive towards another divisive referendum, so that they can get on with rebuilding their careers and businesses, renewing their bonds with dearly missed families and friends, restoring their lives.

They want politics taken off the table for the next few years so that Scotland can heal.

And they are looking for the party, up to the job of delivering that.

Up to the job of stopping the SNP's plans for a Covid-referendum.

They don't want a party like Scottish Labour that is uncertain, that could change its mind.

That flip-flops and gets caught in the middle.

Whose MSPs and MP argue about the constitution like they fight about everything else.

That needs to have a leadership election and an existential crisis every few years to decide which side of the fence it is on.

That could switch its position after the election.

They need a party of conviction, one that is completely behind Scotland's place in the UK and wholly, unashamedly, against the SNP's referendum plans.

That is focused on the future of our country.

That does not accept that another independence referendum is inevitable.

That will fight as hard for unity as the SNP fights for separation.

That party is the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party that I lead.

Our job is to stand up for those people who do not want another referendum on independence.

We will never abandon that principle. It is part of our core values.

Every single one of our candidates in May's election will be committed to that task.

Others will muse about timescales,
next year, in five years, in a generation.

And say not now but maybe then.

But the Scottish Conservatives won't support it, under any circumstances.

We will never say that dividing our nation,
pitting families and friends against one another
and all the bile and anger that this brings is right for Scotland.

We will always stand for up for strengthening the ties that bind our UK
together and for our politics being focused on the things that really matter,
on the challenges that Scotland faces today.

And we will keep making those arguments, regardless of what happens in any
election.

Compare that with the two candidates for the Scottish Labour leadership,
Their new leader, whoever it is, has a choice to make because voters are not
looking for fair weather unionists.

They want to know their vote will really mean no to indyref2.

Monica Lennon has said that she is not going to tell people that they can't
have a referendum.

While Anas Sarwar has refused to say what Scottish Labour's position will be
after May.

Whoever wins, Labour will be half-hearted on the constitution.

Either Monica Lennon will make the SNP's arguments for them
or Anas Sarwar will tell the SNP 'not today but tomorrow is fine' for your
indyref2.

Surely

if you believe that a referendum is the wrong priority for Scotland on the
6th of May,

then that must also be your view by the 7th of May too.

People are looking for honesty in politicians. They just want them to be straight with them.

That regardless of the election result you will stand by your principle because it is what you believe and the promise on which you were elected.

But Scottish Labour cannot give you that promise

because their principles are that anti-Conservative party politics should always come first,

even before the future of our country.

In six councils across Scotland they have formed a coalition with the SNP.

Yet Labour councillors in Aberdeen,

who had the audacity to decide that the best thing for their city was a unionist administration capable of standing up to an SNP Holyrood Government intent on increasing taxes and cutting funding for their local authority.

Well they were kicked out of the party and have remained suspended for the past four years.

And when both the leadership candidates lined up to attack my offer of a unionist alliance to lock the SNP out of power, neither of them said that there would be no deal with the SNP or the Greens.

The Scottish Conservatives will never work with any party that is taking forward a divisive referendum to break up the UK.

But Scottish Labour cannot say the same because they would rather work with than stand up to the SNP.

So, those voters who are looking for a party who can stand up to the SNP and stop a Covid referendum

To be the taskmaster that gets our Scottish Parliament laser-focused on delivering

our recovery

and rebuilding our country.

Need to ask themselves whether that job should be trusted with a party that truly believes in its core mission, to stand up for the UK, and has proven before that it can stop an SNP majority.

Or with a party that will change their tune after the election.

That prefers to work with the SNP than hold them to account.

And could help to gift the SNP a majority by losing seats, like Scottish Labour have in every single Scottish Parliament Election since the first.

Because the SNP want to use this election result as their mandate for another referendum.

They are not really interested in the long job of rebuilding Scotland or of managing our public services for the next five years.

Their sole interest in the election result is whether it gives them the opportunity to hold a referendum at the earliest possible opportunity.

So, if Scottish voters want to stop that from happening then they need to close that door to them.

They don't have to become Conservatives. They don't have to agree with everything we say.

All they have to do is to give us the support we need to close that door again,

to ensure that a referendum is not an option and that there is a check on their obsession.

So that we can deliver a Scottish Parliament and government that is 100% focused on the task of rebuilding.

This week has shown Scotland that this SNP Government is in turmoil.

Riven with infighting, lies and cover up to protect Sturgeon's reputation.

Crumbling under the crushing weight of 14 years of failure

Failure on schools, the NHS, our economy and much more.

And now failing to offer leadership and hope at a decisive moment our fight against coronavirus.

We cannot give this government free reign over the next five years to make our country a mirror in their image.

To make Scotland as hateful and as divisive as the SNP.

They are a party only held together by their obsession with securing another referendum.

And if they are given an opportunity in May to pursue it then they will seize it,

regardless of the cost to our recovery.

But we can close that door.

We can focus the Scottish Parliament onto the tasks of beating coronavirus, on our economic recovery and rebuilding our country.

We can put division behind us.

Both the division of coronavirus, that has kept us apart this past year far more than we would like,

and the division of the constitution, that has split our country for more than a decade now.

But that can only happen if voters decide to come together behind the Scottish Conservatives in opposing a Covid-referendum.

If they unite behind the tried and tested way of stopping an SNP majority.

If they trust in a party that is opposed to independence out of principle and not political opportunism.

That will not do a backroom deal with the SNP or any other party that threatens the future of our UK.

Independence is not inevitable.

A Covid-referendum can be blocked.

An SNP majority can be stopped.

We can secure Scotland's recovery in May.

We can deliver hope of a return to normality.

That is our central message in this election.

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