

“Labour stands for stopping the cuts and investing in public services” – Kezia Dugdale



Thursday 2 February 2017

Below is the full text of Kezia Dugdale's speech on the budget in the Scottish Parliament today:

Today this Parliament has an important decision to make.

One of the most important it has ever made.

We can deliver on the promises the majority of us in this chamber made to the people of Scotland at last year's election, when all but one party represented in this chamber said that we would stop the cuts to valued public services and invest in our economy instead.

Or we can walk by on the other side.

Walk by as teachers struggle with fewer resources with which to educate our children.

Walk by as more and more carers are reduced to fifteen minute visits to our elderly family members.

Or walk by as welfare advisers who support those most in need face even more cut backs.

Now I listened to the First Minister very carefully at lunchtime today and she said this to Ruth Davidson.

She said: "Given the pressure on public services as a result of Tory austerity, it would be wrong to cut taxes for the top 10 per cent of income earners."

Equally, however, it would be wrong to take that Tory austerity and pass it on to the poorest Scots in the face of these public service cuts.

And Labour isn't prepared to do that.

I got into politics to stand up for the very people who will be hit hardest by the SNP's cuts.

And I also heard the First Minister refer to Labour's position on the budget as somehow playground politics.

So can I say to her: I met with Derek Mackay several times throughout this

budget process.

And I spoke to him on the phone as well.

Those conversations were cordial and they were constructive.

And I know he knows that and I know he would agree with that.

So I reject the suggestion that the Labour Party has been playing games.

We have been very clear from the outset.

We said the price for our vote was no cuts to public services.

The more they try to bait me to say that Labour was never serious about engaging in this budget, the more inclined I might be to say exactly what we were talking about in those meetings.

Because the truth is, Presiding Officer, in those meetings this Finance Secretary spent the first half of the meeting telling me there were no cuts, and then the rest of the meeting saying "how much do you need to get rid of those cuts, we won't do it after all".

Completely duplicitous.

The Finance Secretary said to me that he had no mandate to increase taxes.

He said he had no mandate in his manifesto to increase taxes.

And I said to him he has no mandate for these cuts to public services either.

And in the concession he has given to the Green Party today to move away from his manifesto commitment on the higher rate of income tax, he has abandoned that principle of sticking to his manifesto.

And it leaves him open to the accusation: why not use that 50p top rate of tax?

You have moved away from your manifesto once, do it again in the name of protecting vital public services.

And it has been Labour who has been honest enough to say that if we want high quality universal public services then we have to talk about how we pay for them and, crucially, who pays for them.

That's why we have tabled an amendment to use the tax powers of this Parliament to stop the SNP's millions of pounds worth of cuts to local schools and care of the elderly.

Services that are the very fabric of our communities across the country and services that the Labour Party will always fight for.

But Labour's amendment isn't just about stopping the cuts.

It's about growing the economy.

Because for Scotland's economy to thrive we need strong public services.

That means good, well-funded schools giving young people the skills they need to compete for the jobs of the future.

And it means investing in the infrastructure projects essential to businesses across the country.

In this globalised world, if we are to fight for our futures we need to be able to attract that investment into Scotland.

We are competing with the world's major economies for investment and jobs.

Nations like China and India are investing to grow their economy.

Scotland must, and should, do the same.

But the SNP's budget does the opposite.

The employers looking for a high-skilled, well educated workforce will go elsewhere if we don't invest in the greatest resource this country has – its people.

And we know that the SNP's constant threat of another independence referendum isn't good for our economy either.

And it certainly isn't good for our future prosperity.

If Scotland were ever to leave the UK we know it would be devastating to the public services that we all value.

And that is why Labour will not and cannot back any SNP plan to impose another referendum on the people of Scotland.

There is a different path that is available to us because of the new powers of this Parliament.

Powers that so many of us fought for.

It is our responsibility to put them to good use.

Because this Parliament doesn't have to be a conveyor belt for Tory austerity.

And that's why we have come to this chamber with an alternative to the SNP's millions of pounds worth of cuts.

In fact, we are the only party to have tabled any amendments to this budget.

But I make no apologies for saying that Labour will not vote for a SNP budget that imposes millions worth of cuts on local services like schools and care for the elderly.

We just won't do it.

It would be a betrayal of the voters who sent us here in the first place.

I know the impact of the SNP's cuts from my own work in Edinburgh.

I want to make a particular appeal here to Patrick Harvie.

He has campaigned against austerity his entire political life.

And he has spent the months since the government published its draft budget warning about the impact of the SNP's cuts on communities across Scotland.

I agree with him.

All I ask is that he maintains his opposition to the cuts to local services like schools and care of the elderly.

Here's what the Green manifesto actually called for:

- A 60p top rate of tax
- A 43p higher rate of tax.

These were the lofty progressive ambitions of the Greens and today they have settled to be the fig leaf the Nationalists so desperately want and desperately need.

The tax changes announced today constitute £29million of new money.

That's one tenth of the money we need to stop the cuts, and it's one thirtieth of the amount of money the Greens' manifesto said was needed to stop the cuts.

To accept anything less than bold use of this Parliament's tax powers is an astonishing and deeply disappointing revelation from the Greens.

Let's not kid ourselves – this isn't the Greens' responsibility to Parliament shining through.

It's their responsibility they've put on themselves to do nothing which might jeopardise the prospect of another divisive independence referendum.

Nationalism first.

Austerity second.

And somewhere down their list you might just find their environment credentials if you look hard enough.

If the Greens vote for this budget tonight, a budget that passes Tory Austerity on to Scots in the face of a better way, it will be remembered as the day the Greens abandoned any claim to be a party of the progressive left.

We can all remember Nicola Sturgeon the anti-austerity crusader from the 2015 General Election.

Now she has become the Minister for Cuts.

The nationalists who claim to be stronger for Scotland now want to weaken our public services and rip the heart out of our communities.

Today all parties have the chance to back up their previous commitments with action.

To say to the people of Scotland that the policies we put forward aren't just to get through an election but are promises to be delivered.

It's make your mind up time.

Labour stands for stopping the cuts and investing in public services.

There is a better way and I ask members to join Labour in that fight.