

Secure our future

15 Mar 2021

Douglas Ross delivers his Leader's Address at the Scottish Conservative Spring Conference 2021

Friends when I spoke to you four months ago at our last conference, I promised better days ahead.

What none of us could have known back then, was that we still had the most difficult part of the race to run.

That there would be a second lockdown, that has proven to be darker and longer than the first.

Businesses forced to shut their doors, our schools closed, and all of us told to stay at home, again.

Tragically the death toll rose sharply and, with Saturday marking one year from the first coronavirus death in Scotland, I want to again send my condolences to all those who have lost a loved one or friend since this awful pandemic started.

9,725 lives lost, none of whom will ever be forgotten.

For so many people, the past year and especially the last couple of months have been a struggle financially, mentally, emotionally.

We have been separated from family and friends, prevented from doing the things that add colour to our lives.

And everyone has faced those difficult moments when it all seems just too much to bear.

Yet we now also have hope that the end is in sight.

The UK vaccination programme has been a roaring success.

1.9 million Scots receiving their first jab in just 4 months.

What an incredible achievement thanks to the hard work of NHS staff, the British Armed Forces and so many volunteers doing their part for their communities.

I got to see this effort first-hand by volunteering myself at Mosset Park in Forres. A slick operation with everyone working together to ensure a smooth process for those turning up to receive their vaccine.

Our country has always held a reputation for producing our best at those moments of greatest challenge.

For digging deep and delivering when facing the most momentous of tasks.

That reputation is not only intact, it has been strengthened.

This is the greatest peacetime operation our country has ever seen.

I want to offer my thanks and the thanks of my party to everyone that has played a part in its delivery.

And what better showcase of the benefits that Scotland receives from being part of the UK.

A UK that was able to procure 400 million doses of seven vaccines in a matter of months, roll them out at record pace and is now a world leader in protecting its population against coronavirus.

It is thanks to the Prime Minister Boris Johnson and this UK Government that the scheme has been such a success and we have hope of an end to restrictions.

Or at least we would were it not for Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP.

At every opportunity they have failed to offer us hope and certainty about the way forward.

When families and businesses need to see a plan,

When they expect, and deserve, a full route map back to normality.

They haven't seen that from the Scottish Government.

Yes, we all understand the need to be cautious and careful.

But it is also up to political leaders to inspire, to offer certainty and hope.

And with case numbers and hospital admissions falling and continued vaccination I think we can afford to be bolder, more optimistic, more hopeful, more ambitious.

So, in her statement tomorrow, I challenge Nicola Sturgeon to stop putting Scotland's future on hold.

Finally, after weeks of offering so little hope, publish the full plan that we're all waiting for.

Not another half-hearted, half-written holding document that tells people to wait and see.

We expect a roadmap that tells everyone to get ready – because we're getting our normal lives back.

The Scottish people expect to be treated as adults and honestly told – here's what to expect. They know that dates aren't chiselled in stone.

But they deserve more clarity.

Because Nicola Sturgeon – nobody is going to forgive you if, when've you already published a roadmap to another independence referendum, you won't publish a route map to end restrictions,

Not a single vote cast – and we've heard that referendum plan.

While 1.9 million people have been vaccinated – and we haven't heard a recovery plan.

Put tackling the pandemic before the selfish interests of you and your party.

No more uncertainty. Tomorrow we need hope.

Of course, it's easy to see why Nicola Sturgeon is unable to give that clarity, she is clearly distracted by other matters.

All the latent ugliness in the SNP has broken out. It's on show for all of Scotland to see.

It's consuming their party at every level of government.

The scandals, the sleaze, the secrecy.

Abuses of power, cover-ups, dishonesty, deceit, outright lies to the Scottish Parliament.

The SNP have become the very thing they sought to destroy. They are the morally bankrupt Scottish Labour party they once rebelled against.

They are knee-deep in the same sort of scandals that saw Labour lose votes in every Scottish Parliament election since 1999.

The SNP's roll call of shame includes

Patrick Grady – accused of sexual harassment.

Derek Mackay – pestered a child.

Mark McDonald – harassed women.

Margaret Ferrier – put lives at risk.

Peter Murrell – pressured the police, committed perjury.

John Swinney – covered up key evidence.

All the First Minister's men and women. All tarnished by scandal after scandal.

Let's take Scotland's future out of their hands.

Nicola Sturgeon once said "Labour lost because they took voters for granted. They became arrogant on power. They thought they were invincible. And they rightly paid the price."

Now it's time for this broken Scottish National Party to pay the price.

Pay the price for failing women and covering up allegations. For sending the wrong signal – again and again – to women, and to any victim, who challenge powerful people.

Pay the price for withholding evidence from the public, from the Parliament, and from their own lawyers.

Pay the price for 14 years of failure all over Scotland.

John Swinney survived our Vote of No Confidence but he has never looked weaker.

He will never again be called Honest John unless people are laughing at him.

And the evidence against Nicola Sturgeon overwhelming and mounting up every day.

If we allow her to get away with this, then we say that the truth is worthless in Scottish politics.

We can't let more than £500,000 wasted, lies to Parliament and the mother of all cover-ups go without challenge.

Anyone in any workplace across Scotland would get sacked for this, why should the SNP be the exception?

I don't believe that those in politics get to follow different rules.

It is why I resigned as a minister over the actions of Dominic Cummings.

So, we will bring that vote of no confidence in the First Minister.

Win or lose – we will put all the damage that she has done out there for all to see.

We will not hold back. From now to May, we're not going to back off an inch.

I would urge the other parties to get behind us, to stand up for truth, stand up for our parliament, stand up to the SNP.

We have the votes, don't cave in again, don't duck this chance to be counted, don't let Nicola Sturgeon get away with this.

It has been the Scottish Conservatives that have been leading from the front in challenging this rotten, festering SNP Government.

In 2016, we became the main opposition, little did we know that throughout

this parliament we would be the only opposition.

Forcing the SNP to abandon their plans to introduce the named person scheme,
Delivering Frank's law to give free care for under 65s with dementia
and beating back the nationalist plans to abolish the British Transport
Police.

And more recently securing the extension of tax reliefs for business impacted
by restrictions,

defeating the SNP on two votes to publish the legal advice on the Salmond
inquiry

And forcing them to publish daily figures on the vaccination rollout.

That is what real opposition looks like to me. It's in the name: opposing the
government.

Consider the other parties.

The Scottish Greens, well they are just Nicola Sturgeon's lackeys.

Then there is the Liberal Democrats

Teetering on the edge of political extinction for the last six years.

Finally, there is the Labour Party.

Anas Sarwar says he wants to move Scotland on from division but he cannot
even unite his divided party.

Just yesterday he confirmed that Labour candidates would be free to support
an independence referendum.

The dividing lines between us and Labour are clearer than ever.

We're proud of how we fought and defeated the SNP together in 2014. They're
ashamed.

They kick out councillors for working with us. They work with the SNP
instead.

We'll never support indyref2 – come May 7th, they might.

They're not on your side, they're not even on their own side, they don't know
what they should be fighting for anymore.

They're not just weak on the Union, they're weak full stop.

And they won't even stand up for a right as basic as freedom of speech.

That's right friends, Labour voted with the SNP to pass their Hate Crime

Bill.

The most controversial piece of legislation ever introduced into the Scottish Parliament.

Which means that you can now be criminalised in Scotland for what you say in the privacy of your own home.

A party founded on the premise of standing up for the rights of the ordinary man, reduced to a whimpering, cowering, parody of itself.

A party that stands for nothing and falls for anything.

Is it any wonder that Scotland has given up on the Labour Party?

They are scared to pick a side, to stand up to the SNP, to protect the integrity of the UK or the future of free expression.

Anas Sarwar allows his candidates freedom of speech on an independence referendum but he has lined up with the nationalists to stop your freedom of speech in your home.

Well I said when I became leader that I would fight tooth and nail to stop this legislation passing.

And that promise stands, I am not giving in, the battle continues, the Scottish Conservatives will go into this election with a commitment to scrap the SNP's Hate Crime law.

To stand up for our fundamental rights, protect the sanctity of your home

And because that's what a real opposition does.

Yet we are not going into this election simply outlining our opposition to this failed SNP government, we have a positive policy platform that we have been developing to rebuild Scotland better than before.

With bold plans to:

- Recruit 3,000 teachers, with a focus on filling rural shortages.
- End homelessness in Scotland by 2026.
- Fairly fund councils and local services
- Invest in community-led growth in every part of our country.
- Introduce whole life sentences and end the SNP's presumption against short sentences.
- Deliver full fibre broadband across Scotland by 2027.
- Invest in our major roads, like expanding the M8 to six lanes.
- Introduce free school meals and breakfasts for every primary school child.

- Pass a Victims law and end the not proven verdict.
- Protect local decisions on planning developments.
- Support high streets and town centres to recover, including scrapping parking charges.
- Double sentencing for attacks on our emergency workers.
- Set up a network of Job Security Councils
- And introduce a national tutoring service.

And we will seek to deliver those policies in the Scottish Parliament regardless of the outcome of the election.

Yet we need to go further in fighting for the future of Scotland, to stop a lost Covid generation.

So many people are already struggling right now, our economy has shrunk by a tenth.

A referendum and independence would just make that worst.

In a recession, it isn't the wealthy or the old that suffer most.

It's the less well off, it's the young, it's women.

The people who right now might support independence because they feel like they have nothing to lose.

I don't want anyone in Scotland to feel helpless, like they can't control their own future, like independence is the only way that things can get better.

So we need to give them hope, show we have the powers and potential through the Scottish Parliament to deliver the change they need, to get their lives back on track.

Show it isn't the UK that is holding them back but the SNP.

That starts with the most Conservative of values, opportunity.

The belief that every individual should have the tools they need to make their own destiny.

That there is no set path, that where they want to go is their own choice, it is their journey.

That success can come in all shapes and sizes.

I want our party to regain that mantle, to again take up the cause of spreading opportunity to every part of our country and to every individual in our country.

That is why I want to rebuild and empower our communities.

so that our villages, towns and cities can chart their own future.

Not be forced to kowtow to the centralising obsessions of an SNP Government in Holyrood.

It's why we will not support the SNP's closure of essential local services that have widespread community support

Like the Princess Alexandra Eye Pavilion in Edinburgh or Dr Gray's maternity service in Elgin.

It will be clear in our manifesto, written in black and white that we will retain the eye pavilion and reinstate the consultant-led maternity unit at Dr Gray's.

And I challenge every other party to do the same. If those parties refuse, voters have to ask why?

I want to take that approach of localism to every single person in our country.

Not to have government tell them where they should be going, what they should be doing.

But instead to ask them what they want to achieve and have a Scottish Government that supports them to do that.

Which is why we would give every single Scottish adult a Retrain to Rebuild Account.

This would deliver up to £500 every year towards the cost of training for every person.

Giving people in work, the support they need to learn new skills and progress.

And those out of work, or looking for a new career, the chance to retrain and acquire new qualifications.

We recognise that many more people are going to be forced to look for a new job.

Forecasters predict that unemployment will rise to over 200,000 this year.

A number that would have been even higher were it not for the generosity of the UK Government's furlough scheme.

Those people do not have the luxury of going on year long courses with only a winter or summer start date.

They need to rapidly acquire skills now.

So, to realise the full benefits of our Retrain to Rebuild initiative, we would pull together employers, colleges and skills providers in new Institutes of Technology

And work with them to design new bite sized, intensive Rapid Retraining Courses, focused on upskilling people recently made unemployed.

This universal skill offer will benefit all of us, driving up productivity and growth in the Scottish economy, which will bring more money to our public services

Meaning that there will be no need for Scots to pay higher taxes for doing the same job as workers in the rest of the UK.

The SNP want to close doors and limit opportunity, telling people that they have to wait for independence to achieve their ambitions.

But we can be the party that delivers opportunity and gives people the tools they need to succeed and achieve their ambitions.

Let's deliver a skills revolution.

It's a fact that sadly any recession has a disproportionate effect on women.

This pandemic has been even worse as lockdowns and restrictions have closed schools and nurseries.

I know how this feels as Krystle and I have had to juggle looking after our young son

It has certainly made for a lively audience for some of my interviews! And Alistair has picked up a particular habit of screaming as loud as possible whenever you encourage him to be quiet.

Yet for too many families trying to work at home and look after children has just been too difficult.

72% of working mums said they were forced to work fewer hours during the pandemic because of childcare issues.

And there is a danger that this becomes entrenched as our economy reopens because they cannot afford childcare anymore.

Just as we need to give people opportunity through developing skills, so too do we need to give them the support and time to work.

One of the challenges that parents face with our childcare system is the shift from early years to primary school.

In early years, the SNP have committed to delivering 1,140 hours of funded childcare per year,

Working out generally as 9 to 4 on weekdays.

Yet when children move into primary school the day only lasts from 9 to 2:30 or 3.

That additional hour may not seem like much, but it can make the difference between being able to hold down a full-time job or not.

As a family, we're very lucky to have both sets of grandparents within a few miles of the house who are only too willing to look after Alistair if I'm away or Krystle has a shift to complete. But that support is not available to every family.

So the Scottish Conservatives would introduce Wraparound Childcare for families with children in Primaries 1 to 3.

That means being able to access 195 hours of funded childcare per year after the school day.

Equivalent to an hour every weekday.

We will work with youth groups and junior sports clubs to deliver care through existing community organisations.

This will help parents who want to work but cannot do so because expensive childcare costs do not make it worth their while.

With this transformative change to how we deliver funded childcare we can help to tackle the gender employment gap.

Giving opportunity to thousands of Scottish women, who are disproportionately affected, with the promise that they do not have to give up on their job to look after their child.

It is also right though that women feel protected in our communities.

The case of Sarah Everard in London has shocked us all and rightly received significant attention but sadly it is not an isolated incident.

Violence against women and girls is a vile blight that is still too prevalent in our society

And as politicians, we need to do everything in our power to combat it wherever it is found.

Today though I want to talk about a case closer to home.

Suzanne Pilley was murdered in Argyll in 2010 but her body has never been found.

Since then her mother and sister have continued to look, sadly in vain for any information on her remains.

Imagine a loved one being brutally murdered and not even being able to properly say goodbye. How heartbreaking that must be

The family are bravely campaigning eleven years later for murderers to be denied parole if they continue to keep their victim's body hidden.

So I am announcing today that the Scottish Conservatives will back their campaign and work in the Scottish Parliament to deliver Suzanne's law

Building on our plans for a Victims Law to place the justice system firmly on the side of victims not the perpetrators of crime.

Turning back to opportunity, I want to thank the Scottish Conservative Party for the opportunities you've given me.

I joined the party in 2006 and within a year you were supporting my bid to be a local councillor. I went on to represent Fochabers-Lhanbryde for a decade.

Then you backed me to be an MSP and I served as our justice spokesperson at Holyrood.

And you campaigned with me in Moray, the only place I've ever called home, and now I've been elected, and re-elected to represent this wonderful area in the House of Commons.

All of this felt like a fantasy universe when I was younger. The idea that the son of a farm worker and a school dinner lady could be elected to the local council, Scottish Parliament and the UK Parliament seemed so remote as not even worth dreaming about.

To then have the opportunity to lead our party and the fight for the future of our country is an honour and privilege I will never take for granted.

And hope mum and dad, watching at home in Forres feel the same pride I do standing in front of you today. They taught me that there was nothing I couldn't do. That the answer was never to give up or stop trying. That no matter our background, or how much we earned or how many qualifications we had, we all had the same opportunities to succeed.

I'm proud of how my parents brought me up and the beliefs they instilled in me. The same beliefs Krystle and I will promote in Alistair and his wee brother and sister due in just a few months' time.

These opportunities are available to us all and the best way that we can deliver it in the long-term is through our school system.

Scottish education used to be the pride of our nation, the envy of the world.

To be Scottish was to be educated.

Our history is steeped with the lives of great inventors, philosophers and poets.

Drivers of an enlightenment that saw Scottish ideas and innovations taken around the globe and still highly influential today.

How can anyone discuss economics, without crediting Adam Smith?

Or the history of telecommunications, without praising Alexander Graham Bell?

And our education system has remained distinctly Scottish, through more than three hundred years of being part of the UK.

How shamefully ironic it is then that, despite hardworking teachers, a nationalist government has trashed our school system and undermined one of the very pillars of Scottishness.

Allowing our schools to tumble down international rankings, delivering an education the OECD say is just 'average'.

Outperformed by countries including Estonia and Poland.

Is it any wonder that the SNP are now refusing to publish another OECD report into our schools system?

What the SNP have done to education, by cutting teacher numbers, introducing curriculum for excellence and slashing subject choice, is nothing short of a crime against Scottish nationhood.

Making the next generation of Scots poorer, less equipped to compete.

I want to give the next generation the best tools possible to forge their own future.

So that wherever they live, whatever their background they can find what success and achievement means to them.

That is what I want for my son and for all of Scotland's children as they grow up.

Our children don't all have to strive for the same qualifications or follow the same path.

so long as they grow up to be happy, fulfilled and with the skills to aim as high as they can dream.

That is why we want to recruit 3,000 teachers, to end the shortages, and establish an independent inspector, to scrutinise school performance without government interference.

And why I am announcing today that we would introduce a school awards scheme, a Somerville Fund, to recognise and encourage the sharing of best practice and innovation in teaching.

Yet the immediate problem facing Scottish education right now is the pandemic and how it has disrupted a year of schooling.

With online learning tools being inconsistent at best and certainly no substitute for classroom schooling.

I want to stop there being a lost Covid generation and the greatest danger of that happening is in our schools.

I already set out plans to create a national tutoring programme and support early language skills.

Yet that was last year before schools were shut for a second time, now we need to go further.

So, we would invest £120 million into a Catch-Up Premium for every single Scottish school pupil.

Managed by schools, to give them the freedom to invest in interventions tailored to the needs of each child's recovery from the effects of this pandemic.

Whether it is additional teaching time or external tutoring.

With a transition top-up for those pupils starting primary or secondary school this year, who need the most support.

Giving hope to hundreds of thousands of parents that their children won't be held back by the pandemic.

That we will not allow coronavirus to scar the next generation, that we will catch them up.

And start Scottish education back on the path to recovery, not just from this pandemic but from 14 years of SNP vandalism of our school system.

In under two months' time, we face the fight of our political lives. Every vote will count.

This is the most important election in the history of devolution.

It is about nothing less than Scotland's future.

About whether we use the next few years to rebuild and recover from the damaging impact of a global pandemic.

Or we come out of global health crisis to enter into a self-inflicted Scottish political crisis.

After all the collective sacrifice and pain that we have gone through in this pandemic and a decade of fighting the same tired arguments,

Can we just turn the page, and move on?

or will we just accept that Scotland cannot change, it cannot progress, that we are trapped in a loop.

Because there should be no doubt, that the SNP will claim a majority as a mandate to hold another divisive independence referendum.

In what world would this be the right thing for Scotland's recovery, a Covid-referendum, being fought while people are still getting their second jag.

We should be focussed on rebuilding one brick at a time, using the strong foundations of the United Kingdom to help us do it.

We won't rebuild by bulldozing what we have. By taking a wrecking ball to Scotland's recovery.

We won't solve our problems by piling uncertainty on uncertainty.

Taking a health and jobs crisis, and adding a constitutional crisis.

We can have a return to normality – or a return to that bitter referendum period.

The SNP's plans would be nothing short of total recklessness, throwing livelihoods into deeper and longer uncertainty.

Then there is the SNP's 11-point plan to independence, stating that the party could pursue an illegal referendum.

Even Nicola Sturgeon used to say that the 2014 Referendum was the gold standard.

Now the SNP are in favour of a wildcat referendum and a Catalan-style constitutional clash with the UK Government.

Well, we in the Scottish Conservatives will play no part in an illegal vote.

It would encourage disorder, anarchy, chaos

And yet it is now SNP policy.

Their membership demand indyref2 now, regardless of the cost to us all as we emerge from the devastation of the pandemic.

If we give them free reign, if they win a majority, they will hold a referendum at the earliest opportunity. They will not pass up that chance.

The biggest threat now to our recovery from coronavirus is a SNP majority government.

But we can stop that, the SNP are no longer invincible, they are battered and bruised.

Undermined not just by the Sturgeon-Salmond scandal but by nearly a decade and a half of failure and incompetency.

With a leadership dancing to the whims of their frenzied membership, who do not care how their plans will damage the rest of us.

A tired husk, out of ideas, offering nothing to the future of Scotland but the promise of more division.

And only the Scottish Conservatives can deliver this.

In 2016, we overtook Labour to become the largest party of opposition and together with the support of half a million Scots we prevented an SNP majority.

Now as the largest opposition party only we can deliver that outcome again.

Just last week we welcomed our newest elected member Councillor Jenny Linehan, who defeated the SNP in the Leaderdale and Melrose by-election

And we have fantastic new talent going into this election like GP Sandesh Gulhane in Glasgow.

Councillor Megan Gallacher in Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse.

And Scottish Borders Council Leader Shona Haslam in Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale

Each one a bright future star of our party.

Ruth said on Saturday that we had passed peak Nat but I don't for a minute believe that we have seen peak Conservative yet.

I am full of optimism for our future and absolutely believe that this election will see our best result yet.

Friends, I am again promising better days ahead, hope for tomorrow,

Not just because of the ongoing rollout of vaccination and the prospect of an end to restrictions.

But because I believe that we can secure our economic recovery.

That we can put an end to division and get on with the task of rebuilding our country from the pandemic

That we can deliver opportunity to the Covid-generation.

That we can stop an SNP majority and the threat of a second independence referendum.

This is not going to be an easy fight, the odds are still stacked in the SNP's favour.

And if they win a majority, they will ride roughshod over our parliament and over our recovery.

But I believe that with all of your support, dedication and hard work that will not happen.

So let's take our message out to every community, every street, every house in Scotland.

And say that if you do not want another independence referendum: vote Scottish Conservatives.

If you want to put an end to the division that has plagued Scotland for far too long: vote Scottish Conservative.

If you want the Scottish Parliament to be 100% focused on rebuilding Scotland right now: vote Scottish Conservative.

And together we can secure a brighter future for all.