The Scottish Conservative 2021 Manifesto | Rebuild Scotland

22 Apr 2021

Our manifesto is a positive policy programme, focused on rebuilding Scotland after the worst year that many of us have faced in living memory.

On delivering an economic recovery that stops widespread unemployment and creates good jobs and growth in every part of our country.

On supporting our education system to catch up every single pupil from a year of disrupted schooling – so that we do not face the prospect of a Covid-generation left behind.

And funding our NHS to get through the backlog of a year of delayed operations.

It is a programme that will ensure our recovery from coronavirus.

Yet our manifesto does so much more than that, it sets out the issues that the Scottish Conservatives will fight for in the next Parliament.

For renewing our justice system, so that it is firmly on the side of victims and not those who commit crime.

For devolving power and funding to communities, so that we can put an end to the era of SNP centralisation and better support local services, like schools and roads.

For creating a dynamic, innovative green economy, that works with business to drive a skills revolution and achieve our 2045 net zero ambition.

And so much more.

With our manifesto setting out 15 major bills that we would seek to take forward and pass through a Scottish Parliament working to rebuild our country.

Using the powers of the Scottish Parliament to their maximum, rather than complaining that they are never enough.

It is a manifesto that, at its heart, secures and accelerates our recovery from coronavirus.

That uses the strong foundations and support of the UK to rebuild Scotland.

Use your party list vote, on the peach ballot paper, for the Scottish Conservatives, and let’s secure our recovery and rebuild Scotland together.

Read our manifesto here.

The Scottish Conservatives Campaign Launch

26 Mar 2021

As we start this campaign, let me tell you directly why I'm asking for your vote in May.

Yes, it's to stop an SNP majority. It's to stop them holding another referendum. And I'll tell you today why it's so important that we do that if we're going to recover from this pandemic and rebuild Scotland.

But it's about much more than that. More than politics or a slogan or even the next few years.

Really, it all comes down to family; mine and yours.

It's been a difficult year seeing our families much less, separated by this virus and seeing more of each other over a zoom call than in person.

But working from home for much of the last twelve months, spending more time with my wife Krystle and our son Alistair, preparing for the arrival of our second child in June reinforced to me why I'm in politics and what I want to do.

I'm in this fight for Scotland's future – and for the very existence of our United Kingdom – because I'm determined that my kids are going to grow up in the same great country that I have.

I'm determined that they're going to grow up with all the same opportunities that I had – and a whole lot of new ones too.

I want them to know the same community spirit I did – and for that local community to have the power to change things.

I'm dead-set on making sure they get a world-class education at a school on their doorstep, like so many of us in Scotland, have been lucky enough to receive.

When they grow up, I'll support them wherever they want to go, but I want them to feel able to stay in their hometown and be proud of their job and proud of their own family, as I am.

And when they grow up, I want them to look to our Scottish Parliament and be

proud.

I don’t want them to see it stuck debating an independence referendum and not much else.

I don’t want them to see a government hell-bent on dividing Scotland.

I don’t want them to see the ugly scenes of the last few weeks, as our political debate has reached breaking point.

But it’s not just the last few weeks. This has been coming for a long time.

The seeds of this bitterness were sown nearly a decade ago, with a First Minister who acted appallingly behind closed doors.

In the words of women who were let down, that SNP Government turned a blind eye to what was going on.

He was the driving force behind the toxicity of our debate ramping up in 2014 to a level that broke families and friends apart for a long time.

And Nicola Sturgeon took on his mantle.

She’s left the country more scarred by division than ever before.

These last few weeks and months, we have seen an unchecked SNP Government dodge scrutiny and avoid responsibility.

The SNP have shut down scrutiny, kept crucial evidence secret and shunned any and all accountability throughout the Alex Salmond scandal.

Two women badly let down by a botched complaints system and over half a million pounds of taxpayers’ money lost.

Nobody has resigned. Nobody has been sacked. Nobody has been held accountable.

That is incredible and indefensible.

This lack of democratic accountability has occurred while they still need to rely on the Greens to prop them up. With an SNP majority, the situation doesn’t bear thinking about.

John Swinney only asked law officers to release legal advice when opposition parties united and his job was on the line. We would never have seen all those damning documents if there was an SNP majority.

The committee would have been stacked 5-4 in the SNP’s favour if they had a majority and it would have uncovered very little.

But the arrogance of this government to avoid accountability at all costs shouldn’t come as a surprise.

It’s the same approach that this SNP Government has taken throughout its 14

years in power.

Our school system has tumbled down international rankings despite Nicola Sturgeon proclaiming that it was her number one priority

She was going to close the attainment gap entirely – but Audit Scotland found this week that it’s wider than ever.

So John Swinney should be held accountable? Not a chance.

Fergus Ewing promised to resign if the broadband rollout wasn’t completed this year. It’s been delayed five years and he’s facing serious allegations from a civil servant. But he’s still in post.

The 12-week waiting time treatment guarantee for our NHS, introduced in 2012, has never been met.

And again this week we were reminded of the scandal of patient deaths because of infections at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital.

Yet Jeane Freeman took no personal responsibility for those failings.

There is a total lack of accountability in this SNP Government, they believe that they are invincible.

Able to make and break promises, pursue their own interests ahead of the needs of the people of Scotland.

Now, can you imagine what they would do with another majority?

The Hate Crime Bill would have included even more dangerous threats to free speech.

The public would have been left without daily Covid vaccine figures.

They would never have u-turned and finally recognised the need to fund drug rehab beds.

Places like Aberdeen, the North East and small towns all over Scotland would be left behind because, with a majority, the SNP don’t need to listen to them.

Most damaging of all, with an SNP majority, Scotland’s recovery would be derailed by their obsession with another independence referendum.

A plan for another referendum would pass without real challenge and they would proceed with a reckless referendum right away, while we’re still facing a health and economic crisis.

We know that, because on Monday, they started the wheels in motion.

The SNP Government published a Bill for holding that independence referendum.

If it was ever in any doubt, it is now clear, this election is about one

thing for the SNP.

Their election slogans don’t even try to pretend otherwise – they state “Vote SNP for indyref2.”

It isn’t about how we continue and complete our journey out of restrictions back to normality.

It isn’t about how we rebuild lives and communities from a year of social distancing.

It isn’t about how we recover from the worst economic crisis our country has ever faced.

The SNP don’t want this election to be about their record in government over the last 14 years.

Or their programme for government in the next five years.

They want this election to be about one thing and one thing only – independence.

There is no way to vote SNP and not vote for an independence referendum, the two are synonymous.

A vote for the SNP is a vote for an independence referendum.

It is an endorsement of their damaging plan to divide our country.

Of their single-minded focus.

Not even a global pandemic and all the trauma and devastation that has brought could get the SNP to change their plans to run a campaign focused entirely on securing a mandate.

The threat is very real.

Mike Russell’s introduction to the Bill confirms that a referendum would be held in the first half of the parliament, meaning we will be facing another independence vote in the next couple of years.

They have also said that they would be willing to hold that referendum regardless of whether it was endorsed by the UK Government.

Let’s be very clear about why that is so dangerous and irresponsible.

Firstly, it would mean that Scottish Government time and resources would be dedicated towards holding that vote.

To the logistics of organising another referendum.

To the media campaign that would seek to persuade us of the benefits of independence.

To manufacturing grievances against the UK Government, instead of looking at how we work together.

At a time when the UK Government is helping us to get through this crisis right now, through the one million jobs protected through job support schemes like the furlough, £13.3 billion in additional support for our public services and the North Sea Transition Deal announced just yesterday.

It would also mean that there would be less time for our government and for our politics to focus on the things that need our attention right now.

On supporting our health service to get through the backlog of operations and treatments, or on helping teachers and schools to catch pupils up after months of homeschooling, so that coronavirus does not scar a generation.

It would be a damaging distraction.

And then there is the continued uncertainty that such a vote would bring.

How can anyone say that this would be fertile ground for our economic recovery?

That we would see international investment into Scotland or that companies here would think that now is the right time to expand and create jobs.

They would instead be looking to opportunities elsewhere rather than in an uncertain Scotland.

And there is the continued division that such a campaign would bring.

I seem to have a very different memory of the 2014 Referendum from Nicola Sturgeon.

It wasn’t a celebration of Scottish democracy, it was an angry and bitter struggle that has left deep scars in our relationships and across our nation.

I don’t want that again, for my family or yours.

Just when we need to pull together when the collective sacrifice of coronavirus has brought us closer together.

The SNP want to break us apart because they see the pandemic as their opportunity to secure independence.

I do not want to go through the division of another referendum at any time, but it is even more important now that we do not make the current economic crisis worse by manufacturing a political crisis.

We need to focus on our recovery. We need to rebuild Scotland now.

Which is why over the coming weeks up to the election, we will be continuing to set out our positive plan for Scotland’s recovery from coronavirus.

For delivering economic growth and good jobs in every part of our country by

investing in community deals and allowing every Scot to access £500 every year for training.

For delivering a catch-up plan for our schools, by recruiting 3,000 more teachers, investing £120 million into a pupil premium and delivering a national tutoring programme.

For delivering the infrastructure that our nation needs for the future by rolling out full fibre broadband across Scotland and reopening local railways and stations.

For our policy on wraparound childcare which, maybe selfishly, I want to bring in as soon as possible.

Yet none of that can happen if the SNP win a majority and take Scotland through another divisive independence referendum at the earliest opportunity.

So if you want to stop that, I have a message directly for you –

If you want to focus on rebuilding Scotland not another divisive referendum,

There is a simple answer. Give the Scottish Conservatives your vote on both ballot papers and say no to the SNP again, so we can start rebuilding Scotland now.

In the 2014 Independence Referendum, we all came together as one campaign strong enough to defeat nationalism.

We might not have agreed on everything or even many things.

But we embraced Better Together because we knew it could stop the SNP's drive towards independence in its tracks.

That we could get the focus in Scotland back onto the things that really matter.

We need everyone – the majority in Scotland – who wants recovery over a referendum to again unite behind one campaign to deliver that result.

And the only political party that has the strength and the determination to stand up to the SNP, that can be the vehicle that we unite behind to stop another referendum, that allows us to say no to independence again, is the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party.

We proved that in 2016, when pro-UK voters united around us, that we can stop an SNP majority.

In every election since we have been the main opposition standing up to them.

Most of the time, as we saw in the last few weeks over the Hate Crime Bill and then the Vote of No Confidence in the First Minister, we've been the only opposition.

Now isn't the time for weak and ineffective opposition.

And saying not now but maybe later.

But for saying no to a second independence referendum as definitively as we said no to independence in 2014.

So that we can get back onto rebuilding our lives after the devastating impact of this pandemic, without that argument hanging over us.

So that we can deny the SNP the opportunity to take forward that vote and get the Scottish Parliament focussed on doing the job that it was created for.

So that we can work with the UK Government to rebuild our country for the next five years.

In this election, it’s a straight choice between two futures. The dividing lines are clear.

Divide Scotland now – or Rebuild Scotland over the next five years.

Referendum – or recovery.

Separation – or schools.

Accountability – or a majority.

Going back to the division of 2014 – or going forward.

An SNP majority and indyref2 – or the Scottish Conservatives stopping them.

So we have to come together again.

Rediscover that Better Together spirit that enabled us to defeat the SNP’s campaign for separation.

Unite behind one political campaign, the largest and strongest opposition party, to stop another referendum.

Even if you would never describe yourself as Conservative or have never voted for us before.

We are again facing a binary choice about the future of our country in this election.

If you do not want to the SNP to divide our families and break up the UK, then vote for us.

If you want to focus our politics away from division and onto the task of rebuilding our country – for you and your children and grandchildren – then vote for us.

If you want to say no again to independence and another referendum, then vote for us.

Together we can secure our recovery from coronavirus.

Our recovery cannot start if another vote is hanging over us.

All our positive plans will be held back.

The SNP need just two more seats in this election to win a majority, which they will claim as a mandate to hold another independence referendum.

And they have been unequivocal that they will hold that vote at the earliest opportunity, whatever the UK Government say.

They have published their draft bill and they are ready to go.

Scotland's future is on the line.

There is a majority in Scotland for delivering our recovery over a referendum.

There is a majority for rebuilding Scotland over the next five years or more, not dividing Scotland now.

There is a majority against the SNP and their plans for another referendum.

For taking the collective spirit that has seen us through the pandemic into the task of rebuilding our country.

And that majority is what the Scottish Conservatives will be focused on uniting over the next six weeks.

We can stop the SNP's plans for another divisive independence referendum and get our Parliament laser focused on our recovery, but only if we all come together to do it.

So if you want to say no to another referendum, bring an end to division and focus on rebuilding Scotland then let's unite that majority and together secure our recovery.

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 jag 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 unity 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 the 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.

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.

End Division. No Referendum. Rebuild Scotland.

The unionist response to the SNP's push for indyref2

1 Feb 2021

In just three months' time, people across Scotland will vote in the Scottish Parliament Election.

It will seem incredible that, with everything else that is going on right now, there will also be an election.

And though it will feel very different from previous votes, there will still be campaigning and rigorous debate.

The public will rightly ask why is this campaign, happening now, isn't this just an unnecessary distraction?

Why should I be thinking about politics, the future of my country, when I cannot see my family.

Or when my child cannot go to their school to get an education and the online learning tools are not working.

Or when my business has been shut again for over a month with no guarantee of when it will be able to reopen.

Is this really, in the midst of all that's happening, the right time for politics?

The more optimistic of you will say that we could be in a very different place in three months.

That's true. However, it would be bordering on naïve to say that we will be back to normal life by then.

As we approached the end of a horrendous 2020, it seemed as though 2021 could be a fresh start.

However, if anything it has felt more like a reversal towards the spring of last year than a move forward.

We are living under a national lockdown again.

A lockdown that affects every aspect of our lives and the lives of every single person in our country.

Our streets and roads are eerily empty.

The normal routines of our days halted.

We are still in the middle of a global pandemic.

Our economy has been plunged into the worst recession since records began.

And our recovery is not secure, the latest data, for November, before the second national lockdown, shows Scotland's GDP shrinking by 1.4%.

With the Scottish Fiscal Commission predicting on Thursday that our economy will not return to its pre-Covid size until 2024.

Most shocking and saddening of all, over 100,000 people across the UK, including 8,000 Scots have lost their lives because of this awful virus.

That is not a statistic, every single one of those deaths is a tragedy.

A parent, partner, sibling, child or friend.

And I want to express my sincere condolences and sympathies to every family

grieving the loss of a loved one.

Each and every death is a terrible and painful reminder of the danger of this virus and the threat it still poses.

A reminder for all of us to continue to follow the public health guidance to protect ourselves and others.

In the face of these nearly overwhelming challenges, the public expect our politicians to focus on the crisis facing our country.

This pandemic has consumed every aspect of their lives and therefore the same should be true for our politics.

Why should politicians have the luxury of pursuing their own interests when the rules they set for the public have effectively paused the lives of everyone in the country.

For the most part that has been the case, we have had nearly a year without normal politics.

Yes, there have still been plenty of disagreement and debate.

From my own party, the Scottish Conservatives have challenged the Scottish Government repeatedly over the speed at which they are rolling out vaccines, given that this protection is our only way out of lockdown.

We demanded they publish daily Covid vaccination figures, and won. These numbers make it clear where the Scottish Government have to ramp up their efforts as they continue to lag behind, despite the supplies available to them.

We also forced them to provide £20 million to restore their cuts to drug rehab beds.

And we've fought them over their business grants scheme, which is not paying out support quick enough and allowing too many businesses to fall through the gaps in eligibility for payments.

We already got a u-turn on grants to taxi drivers. And we're pushing for another u-turn on payments to small B&Bs.

And on children's education, despite repeated promises, online learning remains a postcode lottery with many parents unable to access equipment and guidance.

But those are challenges of process rather than of politics.

They are intended to be received in the constructive manner in which they are given.

We do not have different goals, we both want to protect lives and livelihoods at this time.

We just have different ideas on how best to achieve those goals.

No one party, especially in this pandemic, has a monopoly on wisdom.

We all have a role in supporting the Scottish people through this.

And that means, in the eyes of the public, we should be leaving normal politics to the side and focusing entirely on the pandemic.

It is our duty to come together and focus on the national interest in a time of crisis.

That is what the public expect.

So, you can imagine the sheer outrage that many felt – myself included – when just over a week ago the SNP launched their 11-point plan to deliver another independence referendum.

Only days before that announcement, Nicola Sturgeon warned us of the "seriousness of the situation we continue to face".

And our infection rates, hospital capacity and weekly deaths are close to the highest they have ever been.

In what world is this the right time to be talking about independence and another referendum.

Like me, Nicola Sturgeon was there in 2014, and while the SNP like to pretend it was a happy celebration of democracy, she knows how divisive in reality that referendum was and still is.

The bruising and hurt it caused, how it split our country, turned families and friends against one and other, undermined trust in our governments.

You only need to spend a minute on social media looking at posts about Scottish politics to know how deeply entrenched those views still are.

Publishing that plan was another attempt to break open those deep scars in our nation.

For every hardened nationalist celebrating a roadmap for ending the UK, there was a unionist crying out that the SNP were again undermining democracy.

And many, many more people in between, baffled at the timing of the announcement, during the worst days of the pandemic.

Then there was the substance of the plan itself.

Proposing that the SNP would hold a referendum, if they win a majority in May, regardless of whether it was legal or not.

Setting the Scottish Government up for a Catalan-style constitutional clash with the UK Government.

A plan aimed at appeasing the rank and file SNP membership.

Going against what Nicola Sturgeon says is the “gold standard” for a referendum and promoting an outcome that she had personally ruled out for years.

I’ve been clear, the Scottish Conservatives would take no part in an unsanctioned vote, a wildcat referendum, unworthy of one of the oldest democracies in the world.

Yet even more important is the tone that this announcement set.

Not only was this the announcement of a plan for another divisive independence referendum,

the content, in putting forward an illegal referendum, was as abrasive as it possibly could be.

It has brought politics – and that same old divisive constitutional debate – back to the fore.

The most important tool that we have in our fight against coronavirus is public trust.

The public need to be united in being behind government guidance, in following the rules.

Tone and communication are as important as PPE and testing in tackling this pandemic.

Compliance is built on trust.

Yet an announcement like this undermines trust, it makes people question motives.

How can the Scottish Government credibly argue that this announcement is above party politics and in the interests of all of Scotland?

It suggests a wholesale return to the partisan and if that is the lens through which they choose to frame some of their actions, then there is a danger that some people may view all their announcements in that way.

Nicola Sturgeon is back to being the SNP leader. She’s no longer the First Minister from the start of this pandemic.

The public will rightly be asking why the SNP should be able to pursue their political priorities and yet they cannot leave their home?

We saw their hypocrisy last week, when they made that same complaint as the Prime Minister was here to thank those who were helping with testing or vaccinating Scots, all the while they’ve begun their campaign for indyref2 again.

The public expects a government that puts itself above party politics at this

time.

Now I’m sure there are those who will try to claim that the Scottish Government and the SNP are separate entities, that this was not a government announcement.

But the SNP are the party of government, the First Minister and the SNP leader are not different people.

And that is before we get into their commitment to publish a referendum bill ahead of the election. Wasting vital government time and resources.

There is no getting away from it, the announcement of this plan for another divisive referendum at this point in the pandemic was reckless and irresponsible.

Needlessly damaging trust in the Scottish Government when it is needed most.

With this announcement, Sturgeon is putting her party before the pandemic.

Now I don’t expect Nicola Sturgeon to give up on her support for independence and another referendum, any more than she could expect me to give up fighting for Scotland’s place in the UK and opposing any independence referendum, at any time, every step of the way.

But there is a question of our priorities here.

About what we see as the right thing for Scotland right now.

My priorities, I believe, would make sense to most people.

To manage this pandemic, roll out the vaccine as quickly as possible so that we can ease restrictions and focus 100% on our economic recovery.

To rebuild our country, starting right now, with the investment and infrastructure we need to create good jobs, opportunity and growth.

To deliver certainty and stability after so many years of uncertainty in Scotland.

Those are my priorities for the months and years ahead.

It is overwhelming in the national interest now to get Scotland back on track.

And this is going to require our whole country, all of our parties and both the Scottish and UK Governments working together, to achieve it.

Yet the SNP’s priority is another independence referendum, which they say should happen as early as possible, even this year.

Their response to this horrendous pandemic is to create more uncertainty and division.

And if they go down the route of an illegal referendum and constitutional gridlock, they will create disorder and chaos.

I never want that future for Scotland.

And I do not understand how anyone, even the most devout nationalist, can credibly say that it is what we need now.

The SNP claim that we need a referendum to rebuild, but how will a referendum help our economy and create jobs.

How do you say to the young adult leaving school, college or university and struggling to find work that a referendum is what they need?

Or to the shop owner trying to get their business back on track and people on to our high streets that a referendum is what they need?

Or to the worker facing redundancy that a referendum is what they need?

A referendum that would hold our economic recovery back, make companies reconsider their investments and employers pause their hiring and training plans.

I am not speaking hypothetically, we know this, we saw it before in the 2014 referendum.

So instead of dividing our country all over again, Nicola Sturgeon should be doing the right thing and putting her job as First Minister ahead of being SNP leader.

She should be uniting our country around a national mission of tackling this virus and rebuilding Scotland, instead of pursuing political priorities.

She should disown this plan, which will only lead to an illegal referendum, and commit to putting our recovery first.

She should put the needs of the Scottish people ahead of the obsession of SNP members.

I started this speech with the timing of the Scottish Parliament Election.

In doing so I posed the question: is this the right time for politics?

I don’t think it is. But in the face of increasingly stronger threats of indyref2 from the SNP, I don’t have the luxury, or the choice, to completely put politics aside.

We are going to need to have a Covid-election.

And my party will fight that election as hard as we have ever done.

We will match the SNP’s renewed threat of indyref2 this year, with a renewed push to stop them in their tracks, just as we did in 2016 and every year since.

Which is why I am challenging Nicola Surgeon to a debate this month on Scotland’s future.

If she believes that this referendum plan is an essential part of Scotland’s economic recovery from coronavirus, then the First Minister should explain it to the Scottish people.

The SNP are not holding back. They’ve taken the gloves off and they’re going full-throttle for indyref2 right now.

So let’s not wait for the election.

Nicola Sturgeon, SNP leader, let’s you and I debate our respective positions right now.

If she thinks that now is the time to talk about a referendum, then there should be scrutiny of her plan.

If she wants to return to party politics, then this is how political leaders put their ideas across, not in government press conferences.

I won’t allow this plan, to wreck our recovery to go unchallenged and my side of the argument unheard.

So, if she is not prepared to disown this plan, then she should be prepared to defend it.

Because we all have a choice over whether we put another independence referendum ahead of our recovery.

Over whether Scotland will have a divisive Covid-referendum.

It is not inevitable. It does not need to happen. It is our decision.

Constitutional politics can be put on the backburner.

If Nicola Sturgeon does not take the threat off the table, then we can be the block to the SNP in the election and in doing so stop a Covid-referendum.

Ultimately the decision over whether we choose recovery over a referendum belongs to us, it does not belong to the SNP.

And that is the message that the Scottish Conservatives will be taking to the country in this Covid-election.

This is the time to come together in the national interest and focus 100% on rebuilding Scotland from coronavirus.

We will need to have an election this year, we do not need to have a divisive referendum.

Let’s choose rebuilding and recovery over a Covid-referendum.