

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.