

Cash for votes: 11 new breaches, and Russell overruled civil servants

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- Cash for votes: 11 new breaches, and Russell overruled civil servants

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The Scottish Conservatives today revealed that in the past four weeks the Scottish Government has made 11 spending or policy announcements that look to have broken purdah rules – every single one in a marginal or battleground seat.

And new documents released under FOI reveal that Mike Russell overruled civil servants by adding political content to an announcement.

The list revealed today, in a letter from Ross Thomson to Leslie Evans, includes:

- On 1 June, an announcement of the expansion of graduate-level apprenticeships. The press release quotes a business in the UK parliament constituency of Gordon constituency, and Robert Gordon University in Aberdeen South.
- On 30 May, £50m for health boards to improve waiting times – coinciding with release of waiting time statistics, and the day of the SNP manifesto launch where the NHS featured, and the party publicised their controversial 'NHSNP' graphic. The press release mentioned NHS Grampian, which covers a number of UK constituencies.
- On the 17th May, £1.5m of innovation spending in Bridge of Allan, in the constituency of Stirling.
- On the 12th May, £2.5m spending on a sub-sea exploration project in Aberdeen, in Aberdeen South.
- On the 10th May, £3.6m for energy products described as 'manufactured in Thornliebank in Glasgow, supporting permanent manufacturing jobs in Glasgow' – in East Renfrewshire, £3.9m for renewable heat in Stirling, and £2.4m for energy projects in Orkney and Shetland.
- On the 17-18th May, 5 videos promoted online celebrating 10 years of the SNP – with Ministers appearing in East Lothian, Edinburgh South West, and Edinburgh West.

Scottish Conservative MSP for the North East Ross Thomson said:

"Millions of pounds of taxpayer funding has been announced, right in the middle of an election.

"It doesn't take a political genius to see the pattern – every one of these

announcements is in an SNP battleground seat.

"This increasingly looks like a systematic targeting of public resources at election targets.

"It stinks. And Nicola Sturgeon's silence on this growing scandal cannot continue.

"Civil service rules state that no activity that 'calls into question' its impartiality should happen. I have written to Leslie Evans to clarify whether the guidance was followed."

The Scottish Government also announced just under £1 million on Wednesday 26th April 2017, the week before the local elections, for aquaculture. This was in the same week that fishing was a major election issue, after two SNP MPs signed the Scottish Fishermen's Federation's Brexit pledge.

Civil servants advised that 'The wording of the announcement should obviously be as straightforward as possible, given the sensitivities surrounding the various election periods'.

They sent a neutral statement for Special Advisers to clear. But the final version of the press release added explicitly political content, linking the announcement to 'the importance of EU funding for Scotland.'

This follows the revelation that Fergus Ewing overruled civil servants to make an announcement on funding for crofters.

Ross Thomson added:

"It seems that in this case, the civil servants did the right thing – only for senior SNP figures to add in political content anyway.

"This just shows the arrogance of the SNP, happily ignoring rules designed to protect the impartiality of the civil service."

Ross Thomson's letter to Leslie Evans, with a list of further spending announcements, can be found [here](#).

Emails released under FOI on Mike Russell's announcement of fishing funding can be found [here](#).

The emails show that:

Civil servants discussed the purdah guidelines – and agreed a neutral statement could be made by Fergus Ewing

20 April 2017 12:09

From REDACTED in the Marine Grants Team to REDACTED

'We have a round of awards under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund which were due to be announced by Mr Ewing at a conference next Friday....

The projects have been with us since January for decisions and the sign of has just happened through an assessment committee, which included the public and private sector.'

'Grateful for advice on the announcement and if we can announce, does it simply have to go out with no Ministerial commentary?'

The response to this email was entirely redacted in the FOI return.

20 April 2017 13:39

From REDACTED to REDACTED, copied to Cabinet Secretariat inbox

'I don't think that the other awards would be caught by either the local elections guidance or the UK general election guidance – there is no particular reserved/ cross-border angle to the grants, so that's why the UK general election guidance wouldn't bite. All this being the case, I conclude that there is no reason why the announcement should not be made by Mr Ewing in his speech from an elections guidance perspective. It would also be odd to announce some and not all of the grants in a particular round.

The wording of the announcement should obviously be as straightforward as possible, given the sensitivities surrounding the various election periods, but a Ministerial comment would be in order, I think – subject to any thoughts Gillian might have on that from a Comms perspective.'

The announcement was then given to Russell to make – with his team insisting he attended the event

24 April 2017 14:49

From REDACTED to REDACTED

'[I] flagged up that there is high possibility that Mr Russell will make this announcement only if [Redacted] and the team in Brussels can fit it in his programme to attend. I have discussed with [redacted] who are happy for Mr Russell to make it.

Finally, SpADs are also content on the basis that Mr Russell attends the expo.'

Civil servants sent around a draft press release with neutral language...

25 April 2017 11:04

From REDACTED to REDACTED

Re: SEG 17 Press release

'I will circulate a draft news release shortly announcing the £09m EMFF grant'

25 April 2017 14:26

From REDACTED in Aquaculture Policy unit

Re: SEG 17 Press release

'Important that we include a reference to aquaculture – suggested line below.

"Aquaculture provides employment and investment, particularly in some of our most remote, coastal communities. It is worth over £1.8 billion to the Scottish economy, supporting 8,300 jobs. Recent export figures show the potential for future stronger growth.

Salmon is key to this success. We are the world's third largest salmon producer, accounting for 94% of the EU's total production. We also export around 172,000 tonnes globally 48,000 tonnes of which heads to the EU each year – with Heathrow exporting over 50,000 tonnes per annum alone. This is therefore a truly global industry."

25 April 2017 15:02

From REDACTED to REDACTED

'I have tweaked an included your suggested quote into the release. [Redacted] – are you content I share this with comms spads?

Either SpAds or Mike Russell changed the release to include political content

25 April 2017 16:02

From Special Advisor to the First Minister to REDACTED.

Tweaks in attached.

25 April 2017 17:24

From REDACTED to REDACTED

Hello [redacted] CC – Mr Ewing's office for info. Please find attached draft release announcing £0.9m EMFF grant. We would like to issue the release in the morning to coincide with Mr Russell's attendance at Seafood Expo. Can you please confirm if Mr Russell is content.

There is no further correspondence published. The FOI return makes clear that no correspondence was withheld from publication. The final quote was very different to that suggested by civil servants and had added, purely political, content. As no correspondence was withheld from publication – in other words, there appears to have been no further editing by civil servants – this therefore means that either Mr Russell or the First Minister's Special Advisor changed the release.

The final quote with different content from version suggested by civil servants highlighted in italics and outwardly political content in bold:

"Raising the awareness and enhancing the global profile of the Scottish seafood industry will assist the sector as a whole, while helping individual businesses to expand into new markets and increase consumer awareness of their fine products.

"This is just one example of why EU funding is so important as it is helping showcase our fisheries sector, improve the quality of its products and develop more environmentally friendly practices.

"Our fishing industry is a vital part of the rural economy, with our fishing

fleet generating £437 million last year and fish and seafood recording an increased [sic] exports.

“Salmon is key to this success. We are the world’s third largest salmon producer, accounting for 94% of the EU production. Each year we export around 172,000 tonnes globally – of which more than a third heads to the EU, illustrating the crucial importance to Scotland of the European marketplace.”

Nick Clegg: There has been a pact of silence on Brexit between Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn

He stressed it is still possible to stop a self-destructive Brexit that would damage Britain’s economy and security, and that the country needs Liberal Democrat MPs who will fight to stay in the single market and give people the chance to vote on the final deal.

He said in the speech:

On May and Corbyn colluding over Brexit

“There has been a pact of silence on Brexit between Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn. It is one of the most cynical acts of political collusion between the two larger parties in a generation

“Strip away the contrast in tone and the differences in language and a striking reality emerges: both the Conservative and Labour positions on Brexit are now more or less identical.

“Pull Britain out of the Customs Union and the Single Market. Abruptly bring an end to freedom of movement. Deny the people any chance to decide on the final deal. They are in total agreement.”

On the Brexit squeeze

“With average earnings growth failing to keep up with prices, consumers are already beginning to feel the Brexit squeeze.

“Price rises have hit energy bills, petrol, and clothes. It’s enough to make anyone need a fortifying glass of wine – but last week it was reported that the average price of a bottle of wine has hit its highest price ever.

On the risk of no deal

“No deal would, according to the Treasury, mean a loss of £45bn a year. To

put this in perspective, £45bn is more money than the entire schools budget for England. To plug a gap like that in the public finances you would either need to raise the basic rate of income tax by 10 pence in the pound, or to make cuts to public services and the salaries of those who work for them on an unimaginable scale.

"This is what Theresa May means when she casually threatens to walk away from the negotiating table. No deal isn't a cuddly alternative to a poor deal. It's far worse. It's a disaster for Britain."

On the cost of leaving single market

"The Treasury figures are an indictment of the central objective of Theresa May's negotiating strategy – to walk away from Margaret Thatcher's Single Market.

"This decision alone carries a long-term price tag of £16bn a year. For that money, you could give every hospital in the UK a £12m cash injection, or provide the average school with an extra half a million pounds."

On Theresa May

"Negotiating Brexit is going to be a tightrope act. It requires subtlety, creativity and the ability to win friends. Above all, it requires sure-footedness to keep on top of dozens of simultaneous interlocking negotiations.

"Instead, we are being asked to elect a leader who is unsteady in the limelight, incapable of straight talking, and prone to chaotic u-turns."

On security

"How will Britain be kept safe after Brexit? Theresa May has vowed to pull Britain out of the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, a decision which means we would no longer have access to vital EU-wide databases of criminal activity.

"Just last year, a not-so-distant era when Theresa May made perfectly rational arguments against leaving Europe, she warned that being in the UK makes us "more secure from crime and terrorism".

"So where are the contingency plans when our police forces find themselves unable to check the databases of 28 EU countries at the touch of a button? If only she would deign to tell us then maybe we could judge."

Changing course on Brexit

"While Britain may stand on the brink of a self-destructive Brexit, we can stop it happening. There is a way to change course.

"What this country needs are MPs who are prepared to hold this government to account, fight every step of the way to keep Britain in the Single Market and at the end of the process, offer you a chance to vote on the final deal.

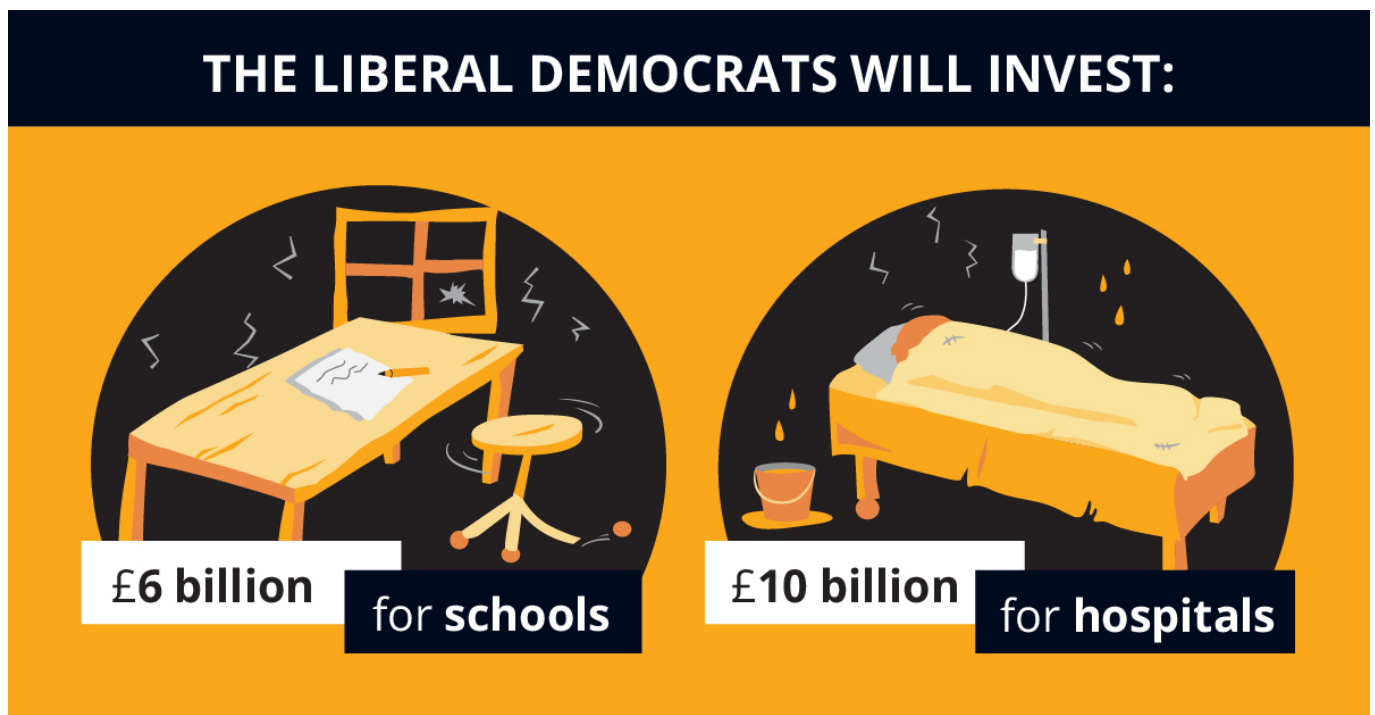
"I have no intention of giving up, and neither do the Liberal Democrats. Because only the Liberal Democrats will provide the opposition to Theresa May and Jeremy Corbyn that this country so desperately needs."

You can read Nick's full speech [here](#)

Lib Dems announce £17bn fund to fix schools and hospitals

Headteachers today are forced to use money that should be dedicated for books, teachers and equipment to fix leaking roofs and crumbling buildings. The new infrastructure fund would give an extra £7bn for schools in England, enough to repair every school to allow them to focus spending on education rather than maintenance.

Another £10bn would be allocated to hospitals over the lifetime of the next parliament, helping address a £5bn delayed backlog in delayed repairs to NHS buildings and infrastructure. This investment would help transform the NHS – repairing run-down hospitals, bringing them up to date with modern technology and building new infrastructure to reduce overcrowding. It would contrast with the £350m for the Conservatives committed to repairs in the NHS in 2015-2016.



The infrastructure fund would be in addition to the extra £7bn the Liberal Democrats have committed to invest in schools over the next parliament; and the £6bn more a year the party would invest in NHS and social care.

Liberal Democrat Shadow Education Secretary Sarah Olney said: “Under Theresa May’s Conservatives, our children are being taught in crumbling schools and our sick and elderly are being cared for in overcrowded hospitals.

“It doesn’t have to be like this. We will invest an additional £7bn in our schools, enough to repair every school in the country.

“This will allow school budgets to be spent on books, teachers and equipment instead of being diverted to fix leaking roofs.

“This week, you can elect Liberal Democrat MPs who will stand up for you on the NHS, schools and Brexit.”

Liberal Democrat Shadow Health Secretary Norman Lamb said: “We have seen with the recent cyber-attack how inadequate the existing infrastructure is for many hospitals.

“Under the Conservatives, money that is intended for capital investment is being diverted to plug holes in day-to-day spending. This cannot be allowed to go on.

“We will invest an additional £10bn of capital spending in the NHS to fix our run-down hospitals, reduce overcrowding and build a modernise our health service.

“This is on top of the £6bn a year for the NHS and care we would raise by putting a penny on income tax.”

Jeremy Corbyn to address six simultaneous rallies across the UK to put forward Labour’s plan to transform Britain for the many, not the few

Labour is today taking its message to voters from all corners of the country by hosting six simultaneous rallies, showing we truly are the party for the many and not the few.

The rallies, which are due to take place this evening from 7pm in: Barry (Wales), Birmingham, Brighton, Glasgow, London and Warrington, will bring people together and show there is strong support for an alternative to the seven lost years of Tory rule.

Jeremy Corbyn, set to attend the Birmingham rally, will simultaneously appear via satellite link at the five other events to deliver his message that only a Labour Government will deliver a fairer Britain that works for everyone, not just the privileged few.

Those coming to lend their support include members of Labour's Shadow Cabinet, big name electronic acts Clean Bandit and DJ Floating Points, celebrity supporters Steve Coogan, Ben Elton and Maxine Peake, and chart toppers Wolf Alice and Reverend and the Makers.

Jeremy Corbyn, Leader of the Labour Party said:

"Since the election was called, we have taken Labour's message of hope to towns and cities across the UK. Tonight, we will speak to tens of thousands of people across the country about the clear choice facing the British people during this election.

"While the Conservatives promise five more years of a country run for the super-rich and cuts for everyone else, Labour will transform Britain by investing in infrastructure and new industries and rebuilding the NHS and our public services.

"Labour will abolish tuition fees to give everyone a chance to fulfil their potential and create a fairer Britain by introducing a £10 an hour minimum wage, banning zero hours contracts, protecting winter fuel payments and safeguarding state pensions through the triple lock.

"On Thursday, the British people will go to the polls and have the chance to vote for a government that will transform our country for the many, not the few."

[UEFA gives platform to boost tourism promotion in challenging global market](#)

Tourism figures published today show a positive picture of tourism performance in a challenging global market place.

The Great Britain Day Visitor Survey shows that in the 12 months ending April 2017, there were 103.2 million tourism day visits to Wales, with an associated spend of £4,265 million. The number of visits has increased 20.4%

compared to the 12 months ending April 2016, while the amount spent has increased 30.2%.

However, the overnight GB survey for the 12 months ending January 2017 shows that the number of visits has decreased 11.6% compared to the 12 months ending January 2016. The number of visits to GB as a whole has decreased by 3.9% over the same period.

Economy Secretary, Ken Skates, said:

“It makes me very, very proud to see what was achieved in Cardiff this weekend. There will be millions of people across the globe who will have sat up and taken notice of Wales as a place to visit, work and do business. We have extensive experience in capitalising on major events which have been held in Wales and we will now make the most of this platform – It’s an opportunity I’m looking forward to grasping with both hands. I’m delighted that we were able to welcome legendary footballers from around the world to Wales during our Year of Legends.

“Tourism performance remains positive in such a challenging market. In 2016 the overall picture for Wales – taking into account tourism day visits, international visitors as well GB overnights visits – shows a substantial increase in overall tourism volumes compared with 2015. The total of visits across all three categories was 15% up during 2016 – which builds on the previous successful years.

I’m delighted that the day visit figures which include the Easter break continue to see an increase this year. We will continue with our campaign work to ensure that we make the most of the opportunities to attract overseas visitors and those looking to holiday at home due to the weak pound.

“Our overseas visitors also increased last year and we’ll make the most of our chance to sell Wales to the world as the place where fans had a remarkable experience during the Champions League Final and which saw Gareth Bale lifting the trophy in his home city.”