

Alex Rowley MSP speech to the Labour Party Conference

Alex Rowley

MSP, interim Leader of Scottish Labour Party, speaking at the Labour Party Conference in Brighton today, said:

*****CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY*****

Chair, Conference, Thank you for that welcome.

This week we gather here in Brighton, united, strong and determined. Determined to expose how this Tory Government is failing working people. Strengthened by the size of our movement. And united around our leader. The person who will be Labour's next Prime Minister – Jeremy Corbyn.

Conference, I was elected to the Scottish Parliament in Cowdenbeath in 2014. And since then I've experienced great highs and lows. There is no doubt that we have seen tough times in Scotland. But we are back on track. And I want to pay tribute to the woman that saw us through after our defeat in 2015. Kezia Dugdale.

Friends, Kez stood up for the Scottish Labour Party in the toughest of circumstances. Both as Deputy Leader and Leader of our Party. Conference, let us send her our thanks today. The work that Kez did, and the result that she and Jeremy delivered alongside our members in June, shows that the Labour Party is once again connecting with communities across Scotland.

This year, we won back constituencies from the SNP that people thought were lost for generations. Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill, Rutherglen and Hamilton West, Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath, Glasgow North East, East Lothian, Midlothian, along with Edinburgh South – all now represented by Scottish Labour MPs.

They will ensure Scotland's voice is heard in Westminster.

And let's welcome each of our new MPs to Conference today, led by our Shadow Scottish Secretary, Lesley Laird.

I know we have asked so much of you – our members, activists and supporters – over the last few years. But

we are so close in so many constituencies. And we should set our sights high. Being a strong opposition should never be enough. Our aim must be to win the next election in Scotland. Because let me be absolutely clear. Scotland can make that difference at the next election.

The choice will be between a Labour Government that will tackle poverty, increase family incomes and raise the standards for all. Or more decline, decay and drift with a Tory Government.

Conference, it's not the SNP who can deliver an end to the Tories. It's the Scottish Labour Party.

Friends, we will win because we will have the best candidates, the better ideas and the bigger vision. That's what our Manifesto this year gave us. A plan for the many, not the few.

In England, people saw straight through Theresa May's hollow words. Because this is what a 'strong and stable' status quo means to working people across this country:

Cuts to public services, to schools and hospitals, pursued by the Tories in England, but also for ten years by the SNP in Scotland;

The loss of jobs that provided the backbone of communities and their replacement with low pay and insecure work;

And the disgrace of the people, who suffered because of austerity, being asked time and again to pay the price for it.

Conference, this is an affront to every decent hardworking person in our country. Scotland is a rich country. There's no reason why children need to go hungry, why foodbanks should be appearing in our communities or why men and women should be forced to spend their nights sleeping on the streets.

Conference, austerity is a choice, and these are its consequences. And this is what the Labour Party will stand against now and always.

Conference, changing our country has to start with changing the Government.

The election result in June has energised us and shown that the chance to serve again in Government – in Westminster and Holyrood – is within our reach.

Labour's Manifesto showed what we will do if we get there. It will be a Government for the many, not the few. We'll take industries that used to belong to every one back into public ownership, and put people – not profits – first. We will oppose a Tory right wing hard Brexit. We want a jobs first Brexit that keeps our access to the single market. And, over the next year, under a new leader in Scotland, we will start to lay out what change with Labour would mean.

Our party has not been in Government in Scotland for ten years, and that has to change. Whenever the SNP leave Government, they will leave having divided our country. Our first job will be to bring our nation together again. And, just as Labour has always done, we will bring people together around a vision of the future.

In 1945, Labour under Clement Attlee gave us the vision of the NHS and the Welfare State. Through the 40s and 50s, Tom Johnstone brought power to rural Scotland and pioneered hydro-electricity. In the 1960s, Harold Wilson saw a future powered by the White Heat of Technology. And in this century, Gordon Brown, a son of Fife church minister and a son of Scotland, ended the scandal of pensioner poverty, made Keir Hardie's vision of a minimum wage a reality, and lifted a million children out of poverty.

Conference, that's the difference a Labour Government makes. And that's why we will never stop fighting for the Labour Government this country needs.

Friends, Labour's mission was about building a lasting legacy and giving people the opportunities they needed to succeed. Today, we have that vision in Scotland again.

We need to set out a plan for our major industries – for oil and gas, for shipbuilding, for finance, food and drink. And we also need to attract the jobs of the future – in advanced manufacturing, in renewable energy and in science and technology. We need to provide this next generation of Scots with better opportunities than the last, by investing in education, training and skills. And we need to renew our commitment to the public services that look after us from cradle to grave – the welfare state and the NHS.

That means being honest about what we have to do to pay for these services and, as Labour, making the argument that our duties to each other mean that we can afford to pay a little more.

Not like the Tories in Scotland, or like the SNP Government that only has one tax policy. A tax cut for the airlines that will benefit the richest the most.

The SNP cannot have a serious debate on tax if its only policy kicks off a race to the bottom against a UK Tory Government, propped up by the DUP, who are desperate to see that tax abolished. The SNP face a choice – work with Labour to use the tax powers to protect public services – or give Philip Hammond and Arlene Foster the excuse they are looking for to give the richest yet another bonus.

Conference, the Scottish Parliament's new powers do not end with tax. As powers over the welfare state come into force, we need to think about how we can use them to show the kind of society we want to build. And that is why I renew my calls today for the Scottish Government to use their new powers to add £5 to Child Benefit – a move that would lift tens of thousands of children out of poverty.

This would send a clear signal that in Scotland we are willing to pay so that every child can get the best start in life. Conference, we can afford this change and we should make it, for this generation and generations to come.

Conference, if we are to build a better society, we also need to think about how we run our country. Scotland has been divided for too long by the question of independence. And, now the UK is divided by Brexit. Our nation faces the greatest political change of our lifetime.

When power returns from the EU, maintaining the status quo should not be an option. Because how we run our country isn't just an abstract discussion for politicians and academics. It's about how we enable working people across our country to have power as close to their hands as possible. That is why I am proud that Scottish Labour supports federalism, and why I believe this points the way for the future of our country.

With the Tories and the SNP, we have two Governments with no interest in reforming how the UK works, and making it work better.

That is why it must fall to the Labour Party. And why I renew my call today for a Constitutional Convention, convened by the Labour Party, to determine how our country can be renewed for the future. And, Conference let me be very clear. We will resist at every turn the Tory Brexit power grab.

In Government, Labour will defend Donald Dewar's devolution settlement – Labour's devolution settlement – so that the powers of the Scottish Parliament are never diminished. For many who voted yes in Scotland, Jeremy has provided them with real hope of an alternative. He has shown that change is possible inside the UK. That should now be matched by a commitment from Labour for a Constitutional Convention and a federal solution for the United Kingdom, with Scotland as a full and equal partner.

Conference, the challenge ahead of us now is straightforward. To restore Labour to Government in Scotland and across the UK. Whoever wins our leadership election in Scotland will be our candidate for First Minister and we will all get behind them to make that happen.

And in Jeremy, we have a leader who is a Prime Minister in waiting. So let us leave this Conference later this week, united, determined and strong. Let's win the next election for working people. Let's win to stand against poverty and inequality.

Conference, let's win for Labour.