

Alex Rowley's Programme for Government speech

Presiding Officer,

Can I too welcome everyone back to parliament.

And can I congratulate all who were involved in the construction and design of the Queensferry Crossing, that magnificent new bridge linking the wonderful Kingdom of Fife and the Lothians.

It was good to be at the official opening yesterday and I do hope more members of this place will venture across the Forth to sample the delights of Fife.

I also want to congratulate all the workers involved in the building of the Aircraft Carriers. The HMS Prince of Wales will have its naming ceremony in Rosyth this Friday and well done to everyone involved.

The First Minister in her speech today has announced an extensive programme for her government and she will be looking for support across this chamber. I want to be clear, Labour will not oppose for the sake of opposing and we will work constructively with the government where it is in the best interests of the people of Scotland.

Equally, I hope the government for its part will be more open to working with others and be open to listening to other ideas and opinions.

She has listened to us and agreed to lift the public sector pay cap. This is to be welcomed.

And her plan to launch a national investment bank to boost our economy is also good news. This, like scrapping the pay cap, was part of Labour's general election manifesto.

Unfortunately, however, without a Labour Government in Westminster, it won't have the £20 billion of lending power to get it started, but we welcome it all the same.

We will be looking for complete transparency in how it is set up – and who is put in charge of what should be a vital part of Scotland's economic infrastructure.

However, it seems that in other areas the government's ears are closed to advice, ideas and experience.

Carrying on with the poor education governance reforms which have been criticised by all in the sector is pure dogmatic politics.

The First Minister has often said she wants to be judged on what her government does to improve our education system.

So let's just remind ourselves of a few facts.

Over 4,000 fewer teachers than when the SNP came to power.

1,000 fewer support staff than when the SNP came to power.

Classes sizes bigger than when the SNP came to power.

Spending per pupil across all ages down.

If pupil spend had remained at 2010/11 levels, primary schools would be £726 million better off and secondary schools would be £308 million better off.

I cannot see how what is being proposed today addresses any of this. Indeed, it seems to me it is a classic avoidance technique – when in doubt re-

structure.

It did not work for Police Scotland, it did not work for Fire and Rescue, it did not work for our colleges and it will not work for our schools.

Presiding Officer, I have used much of the summer recess to meet and listen to as many people as possible.

The teachers I spoke with over the summer told me about the impact of cuts in schools and in classrooms, workloads that have them completely run off their feet, class sizes that are far too large, the need for more teaching assistants and they told me about not having the basic materials to be able to provide the teaching and learning of the quality that we need.

Most of this is a direct result of a severe shortage of funding for education. This is what you have to address First Minister.

Taking control of education from our councils won't address any of these issues.

And that brings me to local government.

We must recognise that local councils are on the front line of supporting people suffering from failed Tory austerity.

Local councils lead on planning and economic development, health and social care, protecting our environment, the education of our children and the health and wellbeing of our communities.

The obsession of this SNP Government to centralise local government has got to stop.

The willingness to pass on Tory austerity to local public services has got to stop.

The government must change course, must build a new partnership with local councils, one built on mutual respect, understanding and joined up planning to tackle the big issues in our communities.

And one which is built on funding local services properly. There will be a budget coming soon and this government cannot, once again, pass on Tory austerity to our councils.

Again I say I hope she really is listening to others.

For it is time to use the powers of this parliament to pay for a fairer, more equal society and to support our public services.

Time to introduce a 50p top rate of income tax and have an honest discussion with the people of Scotland to show that those who can afford to pay a bit more should do so.

And scrap the unfair council tax as she once promised to do. For no amount of tinkering with the bands will make it any fairer.

And while they say they will lift the public sector pay cap it – let us be clear – it cannot be done on the back of cutting even more from public services. It must be paid for.

I have listened to hundreds of people this summer – at street stalls, coffee mornings and on the door steps. It should not be a surprise to the First Minister, that people right across Scotland are very concerned about the state of our National Health Service.

We have an NHS workforce crisis. Today new figures showed how bad it is. Nursing and midwife vacancies are up, consultant vacancies are up and 400 operations were cancelled in July.

I am not sure anything she said today is going tackle this.

For the hundreds queuing outside GP practices trying to get an appointment, the people being removed from lists, those trapped in hospitals, those on

waiting lists for care packages, waiting lists for operations, waiting to see specialists or seeking mental health support, will this programme of government bring change for them?

It should also not be a surprise that people were raising the problems of housing. Shelter says Scotland has a 'Housing Crisis'.

And I agree. So too do the tens of thousands on council house waiting lists, the homeless and the children who leave school each day with no home to call their own.

I have welcomed the government's commitment to build 50,000 affordable homes, but I say again we need a National House Build Strategy to ensure it happens. We cannot allow this housing crisis to continue.

And that brings me to skills, apprenticeships and jobs. In near enough every sector of our economy we have major skills gaps.

Our ambition must surely be a high skill, high wage economy.

And yet we currently have 71,000 people on zero hours contracts, there are 40,000 agency workers in Scotland with little security of work, a figure that is predicted to rise significantly unless something is done.

So we will work with the government on the measures they have announced today but it must be more than warm words.

Will she listen to us and consider Labour's proposals for an industrial strategy for Scotland? Actions speak louder than words and it is actions we need.

And talking of actions, we have worked with the government on its Child Poverty Bill. I do hope it will agree to establish an independent statutory Poverty and Inequality Commission for Scotland.

Setting child poverty targets is one thing, but it is action that is needed to tackle child poverty.

Again, listen to Labour – use the powers of this parliament to increase child benefit by £5 a week to lift more than 30,000 children out of poverty over the next three years. Actions speak louder than words.

And listen to Labour – drop the proposal for a 50 per cent cut in Air Passenger Duty. This would cost the Scottish tax payer nearly £190 million. Drop that idea and invest the money in tackling poverty.

Presiding Officer, there are positive measures in the government's programme today, but there are still huge challenges facing Scotland that are not addressed. We will work with the government where we can, we will hold them to account and we will bring forward the ideas to tackle the big challenges for Scotland.