

Scottish Conservatives call for minister to explain himself to the Scottish Parliament

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8 Feb 2018



The Scottish Conservatives are calling for the parliamentary business minister, Joe Fitzpatrick to return to Holyrood and explain his previous answers on freedom of information requests, as evidence suggests he may have misled the Scottish Parliament.

In June 2017 Mr Fitzpatrick was asked if “freedom of information responses were being screened for potential political damage by special advisers” to which he replied: “No.”

Yet evidence uncovered today has shown that Scottish Government freedom of information requests are routinely reviewed and amended by special advisers for political purposes, not accuracy.

Indeed, in one email chain Deputy First Minister John Swinney is referred to as requesting certain documents are not included in the freedom of information response, for political purposes.

Commenting on the minister’s responses Scottish Conservative MSP Edward Mountain said:

“We now know that the answer given by Mr Fitzpatrick to the Scottish Parliament are not true.

“The evidence suggests that special advisors are routinely involved in the freedom of information process for political purposes and John Swinney himself is suppressing documents when it suits him.

“Mr Fitzpatrick categorically denied this on the floor of the Scottish Parliament.

“Joe Fitzpatrick must return to the Scottish Parliament immediately and explain these responses.

“It appears this may well be a breach of the Ministerial Code of Conduct. It is entirely unethical for a Scottish minister to mislead the Scottish Parliament.”

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- Gap widens between rich and poor student applications to university

5 Feb 2018



Figures published by UCAS today show that Scottish applications to university are flatlining.

The report, analysing full-time undergraduate numbers, also shows that the gap in applications to university between students from rich and poor backgrounds is increasing, that the number of school leavers applying to sciences and engineering has dropped and that the numbers of non-EU (international) students applying to Scottish universities have increased more markedly than other groups.

The statistics also show that the percentage of 18 year old Scottish applicants living in disadvantaged areas in Scotland, decreased this year, from 17 per cent to 16.7 per cent of total applicants.

In stark contrast the application rate for the most advantaged areas in Scotland increased by 1.9 per cent – a widening gap between the most and least deprived areas.

In addition, the number of school leavers going into sciences and engineering has dropped by 780.

Lastly, EU applications have also increased by 40 while non-EU applications have increased by 2,500.

Commenting on the findings, Liz Smith Scottish Conservative Shadow Education Secretary said:

“Scotland’s future prosperity and the success of its young people depends on a thriving university sector therefore the trends within these latest statistics are important.

“Given the financial constraints under which universities are operating and the resulting pressure to increase the number of fee-paying students it is perhaps not surprising to see the growth in the number of international applicants.

“At the same time, it appears that the number of Scots domiciled students applying to university has started to flatline and it is particularly worrying to see a drop in the number of students applying for STEM courses and a drop in the number of Scottish students applying to university from disadvantaged backgrounds.

“In both cases, the SNP tells us it is addressing these issues as a matter of priority but these statistics tell a different story. That is because the SNP has not had the necessary focus on these issues within its schools policy. That must change.”

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- Swinney must provide answers to witness tampering allegations, say Scottish Conservatives

5 Feb 2018



The Scottish Conservatives are seeking clarification from education secretary John Swinney on allegations his government proactively lobbied witnesses due to give evidence to a Holyrood committee.

The Education and Skills Committee was taking evidence from organisations regarding the controversial Named Persons scheme in October 2017.

Freedom of Information responses show that the Scottish Government sought out specific witnesses after they have submitted written evidence but before giving oral evidence to the committee.

When questioned at a previous committee John Swinney said that these were just “routine meetings”, adding: “I have seen organisations come here and express their concerns. I have then gone away and had various discussions with people so that I can better understand their perspective.”

The organisations included Police Scotland, Colleges Scotland, Aberlour, Action for Children and Includem. Subsequently Aberlour, Action for Children and Includem changed their submissions.

The committee has now written to Mr Swinney asking him to explain this strategy and asked for a response prior to the next meeting on the February 7.

Scottish Conservative MSP Oliver Mundell, a member of the Education and Skills Committee, said:

“The education secretary must provide full answers to the allegations that his officials have been seeking meetings with witnesses prior to committee evidence sessions.

“These were clearly not routine meetings and several organisations changed their submissions as a result.

“Anyone reading those emails will think that the Scottish Government has been lobbying organisations to change testimony that they don’t like.

“John Swinney now has to prove that this is not the case.

“The Named Persons policy is badly thought out; sending the Scottish Government attack dogs to coerce witnesses will not change the public’s mind.”

[‘Rudderless’ Scottish Enterprise could be without chief for a year](#)

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- ‘Rudderless’ Scottish Enterprise could be without chief for a year

4 Feb 2018



Scotland’s main enterprise body could be without a chief executive for a full year, it has been revealed.

Former boss of Scottish Enterprise Lena Wilson confirmed her departure in July last year.

However, in a statement to Holyrood, economy secretary Keith Brown confirmed the deadline for applications for her replacement was on January 5, with the recruitment process expected to take another six months to conclude.

The delay has been criticised by shadow economy secretary Dean Lockhart, who said the “dragging of heels” by the SNP was more proof of its anti-business approach.

And in his response to the parliamentary question from Mr Lockhart, the minister added it could be even longer than six months “subject to the successful candidate’s notice period”.

Earlier this year, the Scottish Conservatives revealed how Scottish Enterprise has spent £100 million in the last decade on firms which went bust shortly after.

Ms Wilson’s tenure has also been attacked after it emerged she was supplementing her £210,000-a-year job with other board member roles.

Scottish Conservative shadow economy secretary Dean Lockhart said:

“At a time when Scotland’s economy is struggling, it’s completely unacceptable that Scotland’s enterprise agency could be rudderless for up to a year.

“It’s more proof that this SNP government is not serious about business or the economy.

“The role of the Scottish Enterprise chief is critically important.

“For the SNP government to be dragging its heels in this way is damaging for the economy, and for the many start-ups who rely on the organisation.

“Yet again we have further evidence of why, under the SNP, Scotland’s economy is facing its longest period of weak growth for more than 60 years.”

[Plans to create environmental court to help communities and the countryside](#)

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- Plans to create environmental court to help communities and the countryside

4 Feb 2018



Scotland should create an environmental court, which would allow communities to contest government decisions on major windfarm applications and quickly resolve issues like pollution of rivers and the wider countryside.

The policy commitment from the Scottish Conservatives would also see a streamlining of environmental cases which currently take too long to progress through current court processes.

Shadow environment secretary Donald Cameron said the move would improve access to justice for people in rural communities, and organisations working to safeguard Scotland's environment.

As it stands, most environmental disputes are heard in courts with no specific environmental expertise, and can often prove too expensive to pursue.

For example, in 2016 the John Muir Trust had to abandon an appeal in relation to a 67-turbine windfarm after being faced with legal bills of £500,000.

Creating a specific environmental court, the Scottish Conservatives said, would improve efficiency, have a wider positive impact on the environment, and create a fairer balance between those defending and launching cases.

Following the UK's decision to leave the European Union, a replacement for the role played in environmental cases by both the European Commission and the EU's Court of Justice will be required.

Under the Scottish Conservative plans, one possibility is for an environmental court to be part of the Scottish Land Court, which already holds some environmental jurisdictions and is used for specialist lay members sitting with legally qualified judges.

Scottish Conservative shadow environment secretary Donald Cameron said:

"Creating a one-stop shop for environmental disputes would make life significantly easier for communities and environmental organisations.

"As it stands, when a group wants to appeal a major windfarm decision taken by the Scottish Government, or a village wants to stop pollution of a local river, the pathway to actually doing this is often complex, expensive and drawn-out.

"But now we have the chance to do something to directly help such people, and making the justice system much fairer when it comes to environmental issues.

"We can see examples where major environmental cases have fallen because those appealing simply can't afford to go all the way through traditional court routes.

"That's unfair, denies access to justice, and has to change.

"We're forever hearing of the challenges Brexit will pose, usually from the SNP government.

"Well, this is an opportunity once Britain leaves the EU for Scotland to lead the way when it comes to environmental justice."