

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 Acquaculture 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.***”