

Cash-for-votes scandal: SNP overruled civil servants on £1m crofting spending announcement

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5 Jun 2017



A senior SNP Minister overruled civil servants who didn't want to make a press statement on spending for crofters because it breached purdah rules, new emails have revealed.

The fresh revelations comes after the Scottish Conservatives revealed last week that officials had admitted making "the wrong call" in unveiling a £8 million spending deal for Glasgow just before the local government elections.

The Scottish Conservatives have today said the growing scandal has shown that the SNP Government is "mired in sleaze".

On April 25th, Rural Affairs Secretary Fergus Ewing announced he would be spending £1 million on housing for crofters.

Emails published today show that civil servants advised him not to make the announcement because of the election period – but Mr Ewing ignored them and insisted it go ahead. Mr Ewing claimed the spending announcement was legitimate because it did not involve councils.

However, the guidance clearly states that Ministers should avoid spending announcements that could influence or could be seen to influence voters, particularly in local areas.

Scottish Conservative MSP for the North East Ross Thomson said:

"The evidence is in. It is now clear that Nicola Sturgeon's government indulged in a systematic breaking of the rules prior to last months' local government elections.

"This is a growing scandal that requires an urgent investigation.

"Mr Ewing was told by civil servants not to make this announcement but ignored them in an attempt to win a few headlines ahead of the local elections.

"Nicola Sturgeon must end her silence over this affair. After ten years in

power, her government is now mired in sleaze.

“On Thursday, voters across Scotland can have their say and make it clear we’ve had enough.”

1. See the full emails here:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/2017-06-03-Purdah2.pdf>

2. The release on the funds for crofters on April 25th is here

<https://news.gov.scot/news/croft-house-grants-awarded>

3. The guidance on announcements during an election period can be seen here:

<https://beta.gov.scot/publications/scottish-local-government-election-guidance-2017/>

4. The details of the email exchanges between civil servants and the Minister are here:

18 April 2017 10:05

From REDACTED in Crofting Policy to Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity (Fergus Ewing)

‘I have purposefully not included the total budget for 2017/18, of £2m. This may raise unwanted questions such as why we approved half the budget in the first year

19 April 2017 08:39

From REDACTED in Local Government and Analytical Services Division to Minister for Transport and the Islands cc REDACTED

RE: Croft house Grant – News Release ‘I take it the Local Government Election period does not create any difficulties with this announcement?’

19 April 2017 09:05

From REDACTED to Minister for Transport and the Islands cc REDACTED

‘I agree with [Redacted] that we should double check this can be announced given restrictions around LG elections’

19 April 2017 11:41

From REDACTED to Minister for Transport and the Islands cc REDACTED

‘Dear all, I have checked the guidance and discussed with comms colleagues and would advise against this being announced during the restricted period for the local government elections.

The funding is particularly relevant to a couple of council areas and could

therefore be argued to potentially have a bearing on the local election campaign, particularly with crofting issues having been very topical recently.

'I'd suggest we don't issue the press release and there is no croft visit by Yousaf'

Fergus Ewing overruled them:

20 April 2017 12:46

From REDACTED on behalf of Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity To Minister for Transport and the Islands Cc Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity

'All, Mr Ewing has commented that a news release should still go ahead as it has nothing to do with the local government. Aware Mr Yousaf is already on Uist but would it be possible for a news release next week? If not please can you provide more details as to why this shouldn't go out and I will update Mr Ewing.'

21 April 2017 13:31 From REDACTED To REDACTED Cabinet Secretariat inbox

'Mr Ewing is keen for a Scottish Government announcement of funding for the Croft House Grant Scheme to be announced next week.

This would be to confirm that £948,000 has been awarded to help crofters in some of Scotland's most rural and remote communities benefit from better housing.

With 29 crofters sharing the funding which enables them to build or improve homes, helping to retain and attract people to rural communities.

Given the prominence and recent coverage around crofting and the fact that this is a funding announcement, initial consideration within comms was that it would be best to avoid announcing during the Local government pre-election period.

The Cabinet Secretary has now requested advice on whether the announcement could go ahead. Can I have a view from you?'

Senior Civil Servants fell into line behind Ewing – but broke their own guidance

21 April 2017 14:26

From Head of Media for the Rural Economy & Connectivity To Cabinet Secretary for the Rural Economy and Connectivity; Minister for Transport and the Islands

'I have discussed with Cabinet Secretariat and [Redacted] has confirmed [Redacted] is content for a factual release to be issued next week'

A further email followed from the Cabinet Secretariat confirming they were not of the view local election guidance would 'pose a problem' because 'the crofting counties are within a clearly defined geographical area, so I don't think there will be much surprise from a local authority standpoint.'

This is not what the guidance states. It is in fact the opposite of what the guidance states. The guidance, available here, states that:

'Particular care should be taken over official support, and the use of public resources, including publicity, for Ministerial or official announcements which could have a bearing on matters relevant to the local elections...national announcements by the Scottish Government may have a particular impact on local areas, for example, the publication of policy statements which have a specific local dimension.

Ministers will wish to be aware of the potential sensitivities in this regard and might decide, on advice, to postpone making certain announcements until after the local elections.'