

Kezia Dugdale Scottish Labour Conference Speech 2017

Kezia Dugdale, Leader of the Scottish Labour Party

Scottish Labour Conference – Saturday 25th February 2017

Chair, conference, friends,

Thank you for that incredible welcome.

It's great to be back in Perth.

And let me begin by thanking my friend, Sadiq Khan, for such a powerful speech.

Conference, Sadiq is a reminder to us of what we are fighting for.

He reminds us why we should be restless every single day that we are not in power.

Because he shows us what we can achieve when the power of our Labour values are matched with the power of Government.

He inspires us to work harder and to aim higher not just because of the work he does, but because of what he represents.

Conference, to those who say that politics in the United Kingdom can't change, and to those who say that in the days of Trump, hope and unity can't win, I say look to London.

Not a "dark star" as Alex Salmond once called it, but a city whose people elected the boy who grew up on a council estate and ended up in Parliament.

A city which replaced Boris Johnson with the son of a bus driver.

And a city which rejected a Tory smear campaign of racism, intolerance, bigotry and Islamophobia and elected Europe's first Muslim Mayor.

Conference, he is the pride of London.

He is the pride of Labour.

Thank you Sadiq.

Conference, just weeks from now people across Scotland will go to the polls for the sixth time in five years.

Every time there's been an election or referendum we've asked you to go into your communities and make Labour's case.

It's not always been easy.

But you've done it.

And you've done it because you know that every door knocked, every telephone call made and every conversation had, makes a difference.

This year I'm asking you to do the same again.

Because, friends, we have so much to fight for at these elections in May.

In the places where we're in power we've built schools, community centres and libraries.

We've invested in the education of our children, kept our old people safe and warm and got our young people into work.

While the SNP Government has handed on Tory cuts to our councils over the past five years – £1.5 billion of cuts – Labour has shown that we are the last barrier between the people and austerity.

In Glasgow, the Commonwealth Games – delivered by Labour – brought thousands of jobs to the city, and helped to regenerate the East End.

In Aberdeen, where budgets have been stretched, Labour councillors have looked for new sources of funding, and issued bonds to raise an extra £370 million.

In Renfrewshire, Labour led where the SNP Government followed, by finding a way to abolish the bedroom tax.

And in Stirling, it was a Labour council that was the first to introduce 600 hours a year of free childcare and early learning for two, three and four year olds.

Conference, when the SNP find times are tough, they blame the UK Government. When Labour sees tough times, we roll up our sleeves and get on with protecting people.

In 2012, the SNP said Glasgow was a stepping stone to independence. How wrong they were.

And when they say now "It's time for change", I say communities have changed under Labour. They have been transformed.

It's the SNP which has been in power for a decade in Scotland.

It's the SNP which has failed to alleviate Tory austerity, which has failed the poorest in our society, which has our health and education systems in crisis.

Conference, that's the change we need.

That's the change we're fighting for.

So in May let's get out and elect Labour to stand up for our communities, not SNP councillors who only have one thing on their mind.

Conference, our council campaign will be rooted in our communities.

That's why I'm proud that our local government campaign manager and my deputy, Alex Rowley, has been out there leading from the front.

And he's been racking up the miles across the country:

Glasgow, Stirling, Kilmarnock, Rosyth and Dundee.

Edinburgh, Kinross, Aberdeen, Greenock, Perth.

Alloa, Paisley, Bathgate, Falkirk and Inverness.

Conference, Alex's diary is beginning to look like a Scottish road map.

Between now and May 4th, he will be at the forefront of our local government campaign.

And I know that our councillors and candidates will get the support from him that they need... to win.

So, Alex, on behalf of all of them, thank you.

Conference, a little under eighteen months ago, you elected me as your leader with a mandate to change the way we run this party and how we serve working people across Scotland.

Before I took on this job... and after, I was honest with you about the challenge we faced.

The referendum changed Scottish politics for good, and I said that if we were to succeed again in the future, Scottish Labour had to change too.

The last time I stood on this stage, in my first conference speech as leader, I said that decisions about what happens to the Scottish Labour Party would be made here in Scotland.

And a year and a half after I said it would happen, we've made it happen.

Once and for all, no one can question who makes our policy, who selects our candidates and who is in charge of this party.

And for the first time, we have secured permanent representation on Labour's NEC.

I also promised you that under my leadership this would be an open and democratic party. One that puts our members and our most historic partners – the trade unions – at the centre of our movement. And that's exactly what we've done.

Last year, we had a manifesto I was proud of. It was based on a simple idea

that we all believe in. And it told a simple truth. That if you want high quality public services we have to talk about who pays for them.

It was a tough message but it was the right, honest and decent thing to do.

And against attacks from both the SNP and the Tories, we have stayed true to our values.

I take no joy in the fact that our prediction... that millions would be cut from the budget for frontline services... has been proven right.

So we'll continue to make the argument that the richest should pay their fair share for the services we all rely on.

And, friends, just yesterday we passed another milestone in the history of our party.

Labour – the party of devolution, the party that gave life to a Scottish Parliament that many said was an impossible dream, started writing the next chapter of that story.

With your backing, we have set out a plan to deliver a stronger Scottish Parliament, and a vision for a reformed United Kingdom.

We are a party that believes in being part of something bigger, but... understand that decisions should be taken as close to the people as possible.

That is why we have backed federalism.

Friends, it isn't Ruth Davidson and the Tory's status quo, or the SNP's damaging plans for independence.

It is a Labour vision for Scotland's future.

Conference, this is how I have delivered on the mandate you gave me.

And only by working together over the months and years ahead can we complete the task of rebuilding our party.

Together, we have put in place a solid foundation for the future.

Our party – now more open and democratic.

Our voice – strongest as part of a UK movement.

Our decisions – made here in Scotland.

With a plan for a stronger Scottish Parliament and a reformed UK.

And a platform that defends public services, our schools and Labour's lasting legacy – our NHS.

Conference, our world is changing.

At a time when politics can seem more and more narrowly focused on taking us out of the EU, or breaking up the UK, the world around us is transforming at a pace that has never been seen before.

The world is more open than it has ever been.

And technology gives us boundless opportunities, but also demands we think again about the way we work and live.

This time ten years ago, Facebook had only been open to everyone for five months.

And no one had heard of the iPhone.

Today, more people use Facebook than there were people alive one hundred years ago.

And every minute, 300 hours of video are uploaded to YouTube.

But it's not just technology that has changed the way we live.

In the past, war, famine and disease killed millions upon millions of people every single year.

But today, more people die as a result of violent crime, than they do as a result of war.

More and better knowledge means that killer diseases are declining.

Humanity has succeeded in taming, if not eradicating, the disasters that held us back throughout much of our history.

I don't think our problems are solved though – far from it – but when you take a moment to stand back and look at where we've got to, you realise that if you gave someone the choice of being born at any point in human history so far, they would choose today.

We live longer, are more peaceful and more prosperous than ever before.

But none of this has happened by chance.

It's happened out of choice, and because of decisions that have been made over the past 50 years.

Technology has improved because of the ingenuity and skill of scientists and engineers, often funded by governments who backed them with billions of pounds.

We've made this progress because people and politicians made choices that got us this far.

Choices Labour made in power. Introducing a minimum wage, raising family incomes, creating civil partnerships, investing in our NHS and lifting millions out of poverty.

And if we make the right choices, there's nothing to say we can't make the same progress again.

But in too many places in Scotland and around the world, that's just not how it feels.

Instead, people look to the future and feel more vulnerable, fragile and uneasy about what is coming around the corner.

Despite the opportunities on offer, our young people feel they have less chance to succeed than their parents did.

People feel abandoned because the world around them is changing too fast and too many people are being left behind.

Ten years ago, we failed to anticipate a financial crash that began to change politics in this country.

Too many people at the time couldn't see that 'business as usual' just wasn't going to work anymore.

After the financial crash, Gordon Brown and Alistair Darling focused on keeping people's life savings secure, as many people as possible in work and off the dole. That was the right thing to do.

In 2010, politicians were taught a hard lesson.

They stepped in to rescue the banks, but no one came to rescue our politics.

The way we did politics had to change. We had to work harder at taking people with us, hearing what they had to say, and making sure they knew we were listening.

This should have been our focus. Instead we were diverted by arguments about independence and Brexit.

Two sides of the same coin.

And the truth is they're ideas that risk turning the clock back on the progress we've made.

Progress built on Labour and trade union values.

Solidarity, co-operation, mutual understanding and respect.

They are the values that are under attack from independence and from Brexit.

And I won't stand for it.

Conference,

The 2014 referendum shook me to the core.

I know that for lots of people, it was exhilarating.

But for many others, it was both physically and emotionally exhausting.

It divided our country.

It set family members and friends against each other.

It created arguments and rows that most people are pleased are now behind them.

Our country now feels more divided and more fractured than ever before.

Instead of focusing on what we can do to build our future, we're too busy labelling each other because of decisions we took in the past.

Yes. No.

Leave. Remain.

Focusing on what makes us different rather than what we can do to bring us together.

Conference, I am still so proud that I fought for our values in that referendum, and that so many of you here today made the argument alongside me.

We put the national interest and the interests of working people ahead of our own party interest.

Well let me tell you conference.

We made the right decision.

When we warned about threats to our public services, we were told we were wrong. Now Scotland's deficit is even bigger than it was then.

But some people still say that we should back independence. Not because it's right, but because they think it's popular.

Let me say this to them.

The Labour Party I lead will never betray its values so easily.

It will never turn its back on the idea that together we're stronger.

That we can achieve far more working in partnership than we can alone.

Conference – Labour's historic values will endure even under this greatest threat.

We will never sacrifice the jobs of workers at Rosyth and Govan and Faslane.

The jobs of thousands of people in Edinburgh and Glasgow in science, technology and financial services whose companies are already feeling the effects of Brexit.

Or the oil workers in Aberdeen who need more support, not greater uncertainty.

It will never cut off opportunities for our young people and tell them that their life chances should be curtailed by a border.

Or look our older people in the eye and say that we are willing to put their pensions at risk.

Or ask working families to face higher bills.

And it will never turn its back on the millions of people who feel not just left behind, but abandoned by the people in charge.

It will always put the people of this country first.

Conference, the Labour Party I lead... will never support independence.

Independence. It's not an escape from Tory rule, it's not an escape from Brexit, it's not an alternative.

It's the same old song that the SNP has been singing for decades.

Conference, it's time Nicola Sturgeon changed her tune.

I want the First Minister of Scotland to focus on the Scottish NHS, on our economy and on our schools.

I don't want a First Minister whose priority is the constitution.

It may serve up a convenient headline to divert attention, but it doesn't put food on the table or teach our kids how to read and write.

I don't want any more uncertainty and upheaval.

We need stability and focus. And that's what I will strive for... each and every single day.

Friends, yesterday, you supported my plans for change with an even stronger Scottish Parliament inside a federal United Kingdom.

This is an historic milestone for our party which will protect the rights and benefits we get from being part of the UK.

And with Brexit, more power is returning to the UK, and I want that to mean more powers for Scotland.

It presents us with a significant opportunity.

In the first instance, in areas that are already devolved, like fishing and agriculture, powers should return directly to the Scottish Parliament.

But in a whole host of other areas where power currently sits with the European Union, we should be asking what should happen in the future.

And I will be guided by where I think the rights and protections for working people will be best guaranteed.

So, with the social chapter ceasing to apply in the UK, this is the right time to look at protections at work, and the minimum wage, and ask if power over those should sit in Holyrood. And I believe it should.

The same is true of power over immigration. As we leave the single market, we will need to design a new immigration system for the UK.

It needs to better serve Scotland's needs and consider the views of business and of people across the country. We need to make sure we have a fair system.

These decisions about the future of our country cannot just be taken by politicians.

That is why we need a People's Constitutional Convention, made up of men and women from every corner of the UK, to decide how this country should be run in the 21st century.

With the Tory Government refusing to take this idea forward, it is now the job of the opposition to make it happen.

Jeremy Corbyn has already given his support.

Conference, let's thank him for everything he is doing to make this happen.

And I can share with conference today, that in the coming months, together with Gordon Brown, I will join Labour representatives from Wales and the regions of England to begin to set out how we will take this agenda forward together.

Conference, I do not want another referendum on breaking up the UK.

Our country still bears the scars of the last one, and no one wants to go through that again any time soon.

That's why Labour will never support one in the Scottish Parliament.

But the unfortunate truth is this.

With the SNP supported by the Greens, they have a majority in the Scottish Parliament.

So if this country faces another referendum at any point in the future, I will work tirelessly to make sure that our side of the argument is successful again.

To ensure that we show that our values of solidarity and co-operation can win out.

And to protect the jobs and opportunities of everyone who lives and works in Scotland.

That is why today I am announcing the launch of together stronger.scot and asking everyone who shares Labour's vision, of a strong Scotland inside a reformed UK, to sign up.

If you share our values.

If you believe our country is already divided enough.

And if you believe the First Minister should shelve her plans for a second independence referendum.

Then join with us.

Instead of exploiting division, we want people across Scotland to share our vision of an open, tolerant and outward looking Scotland.

Friends, this is our movement for a new Scotland.

Our movement for a fairer, better more equal Scotland.

A Scotland that is strong and secure in its own identity, and where we think more about what unites us than divides us once again.

Conference, our argument against Independence is built on our Labour values, and our movement for a new Scotland has at its heart creating jobs and building our economy.

Because without a strong economy, we can't put our values into practice.

Government has a responsibility to the poorest, but it also has to make sure that working families are protected, and that wages keep up with prices.

Under the SNP, Scottish growth is now less than a third of the UK's.

Two of the largest sectors in our economy – the oil industry and the financial industry – are declining.

The problem for the SNP is that its drive for independence means it can't admit the weaknesses in our economy.

And it means it can't take advantage of the opportunities that may be round the corner.

Because you can't make the case for oil and gas decommissioning work to come to Scotland, if your case for independence relies on an economy fuelled by never ending oil.

You can't admit how many jobs have already been lost in the financial sector, if you still need to convince people that they'll be there long into the future.

And you can't use Brexit to explain away all the problems when you're calling for Scotland to withdraw from its biggest single market.

For Labour, our priorities are, firstly, equipping Scotland for a future of high skill jobs.

And, secondly, doing what we have always done – protecting the incomes of working families across the country.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, at the outset of the first wave of automation, too many industrial jobs were replaced with low pay and low skilled jobs in the service sector.

Now, other skilled jobs – long thought invincible to machines – are under threat. Some experts say that we will lose 20 per cent of Scotland's jobs in the financial sector to machines in the next two years.

No matter how you look at it, it's clear that our economy needs to radically change if it is going to succeed.

We have to prepare people for the future with the best education to give them the ability to compete for high skilled jobs.

This week, we saw the SNP Government push through another budget full of measures that will cut right to the heart of our public services.

It will see millions lost from frontline local government services.

And will, once again, make the job of our school teachers even more difficult.

I've always called spending on education an investment, because that's exactly what it is.

It's the payment we make as a society so that the next generation get even better opportunities than our own.

But no matter how the SNP tries to dress it up, the budget the government passed on Thursday can't make up for nearly a decade of neglect.

The gap between the richest and poorest children has persisted, while teachers have been lost and literacy and numeracy rates have declined.

Giving every child the best start in life means giving them a better chance to succeed, to get into university or a good college course, a trade or training, and ultimately to get a job that will set them up for life.

Our country has the potential to take advantage of opportunities in some great, new innovative industries, but they need far more support.

Edinburgh is now one of the country's centres for computer coding, designing the apps and programmes that we use on our phones, tablets and computers.

But the SNP Government still doesn't have a published strategy for how we can grow our tech sector so it can provide more jobs in the future.

This isn't a consequence of a lack of power – it's a lack of political will.

As the Scottish Parliament takes on more tax powers, growing our economy – through investing in the skills and ingenuity of our people, and supporting new businesses – is even more important.

If we don't, it will mean a direct impact for our schools, hospitals and other public services.

That is why I can announce today that in the coming months, that I and our economy spokesperson, Jackie Baillie, will launch Scottish Labour's Industrial Strategy, and begin to set out our thinking for the new economy.

This will include specific work, as many – including Dundee City CLP – have called for, on how Scotland responds to the rise in automation, actions we can take to protect Scottish jobs and ideas for how we can create new opportunities in the technology and digital sectors.

And as the other powers of the Scotland Act arrive in Holyrood, we will set out plans to use them to grow our economy, and also to protect those who are hardest hit by austerity and by the consequences of Brexit.

Scottish Labour.

Doing what it's always done.

Stepping up to the challenges of the future.

Focusing on the economy.

Creating jobs.

Improving lives.

And building a better future, together.

Our second economic priority is protecting family incomes.

As the effects of rising prices begin to take hold over the coming months, Scotland and the rest of the UK faces a renewed cost of living crisis.

For the first time ever, real wages are expected to decrease over the course of this Parliament.

This is unprecedented and demands attention and action.

In 1946, Labour introduced family allowance because we believed that everyone – regardless of their income – deserved support from the Government when they had children.

It demonstrated Labour's commitment to giving every child the best start, and giving every family something back from the money they paid in.

It was an idea that said very clearly that together we're stronger.

Today, with the new welfare powers in the Scottish Parliament, we have a duty

to look at what we can do to return to those principles.

Conference, I've given Nicola Sturgeon a fair number of ideas over the past few years that she's taken on as her own.

Quite a few were made in my last conference speech I made here in Perth.

Guaranteeing a living wage for care workers.

An attainment fund for every school.

Full grants for every looked after child in Scotland who wants to go to university.

Every one of them Labour policies that I announced on this stage in 2015.

Every one of them now a Government policy.

So don't let anyone tell you, conference, that we can't make a difference from opposition.

Today I've got another idea for Nicola Sturgeon.

220,000 Scottish children are still in poverty.

Charities, anti-poverty organisations and others across Scotland have called for an increase in child benefit to tackle this. And I agree.

So today I can announce that Labour will respond to calls to support families by backing the campaign to top-up child benefit in Scotland.

Using the new welfare powers in the Scottish Parliament, we will campaign to create a new Scottish Child Benefit.

Our plan would see child benefit increase by £240 per year by the end of this Parliament, increasing by £13 a month next year, before rising to £20 per month in 2020.

The Child Poverty Bill – now in the Scottish Parliament – should take meaningful action to combat poverty, as well as setting targets.

That is why in the coming weeks, we will push the Government to include this action in the Child Poverty Bill.

And if they won't do it we will seek to amend the law ourselves.

Our plan would mean help for the majority of families across Scotland, and would mean 18,000 fewer children living in poverty in the first year, and up to 30,000 once these changes are fully implemented.

It would mean starting to reverse the fall in the value of child benefit that families have seen over the past five years.

And it would send a strong message, that Scotland will not allow hard working

families to bear the brunt of Brexit.

Conference, families across Scotland are sick and tired of living in a divided country.

They want politicians they can trust.

They want a plan to get us through Brexit.

They don't want us to divide our country all over again.

That should be Labour's priority.

Throughout our history we always put working people first.

The clue is in the name – Labour.

And that should be our guide again, as we begin to chart a new course for our party and our country.

My promise to people across Scotland is this.

I will always put your jobs first.

I will fight for the support your family and your community needs.

I will never shy away from being honest about the challenges our country faces.

And that's why I say clearly today – I will never support dividing our country.

Friends, our country has always succeeded when we have been united.

Scotland was built by people who came together to create something bigger than themselves.

Whose ideas didn't just shape our country, but shaped the world.

And who realised that we have more in common than that which divides us.

Let's discover that spirit again.

Let's reach out into our country, and into the world.

Let's tell Labour's story for a new time.

Let's go out and tell all of Scotland that together, we're stronger.

Thank you.

ENDS