

Labour created the welfare state and will always fight to protect it

By Alex Rowley MSP, Scottish Labour deputy leader



WHEN the recent oil price crash hit the north-east, thousands of Scots were suddenly left without work.

The number of unemployment benefit claimants soared in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire, with many without a job for the first time in their lives. This is why we have a welfare state, which – like the NHS – is there for all of us in our time of need.

Nobody knows what is around the corner, and our benefits system provides security and dignity should we fall on hard times.

Labour created the welfare state and will always fight to protect it.

But poverty in Scotland is rising due to SNP and Tory attempts to balance the books on the backs of the poorest, slashing funding to public services and to social security payments.

By the end of this decade up to £1 billion will have been cut from Holyrood's budget by the Tories at Westminster.

However, the SNP has the power to stop the cuts – yet has chosen to meekly pass austerity on to families here in Scotland. In fact, Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon have cut £1.5 billion from local services since 2011, including £170 million this year alone.

All this does is push more people into poverty, and increase the reliance on our welfare state.

In the coming years, many existing benefits are being merged into Universal Credit, which is supposed to make access to social security payments less complicated. It has been rolled out in parts of Scotland and is due to be introduced in full across the country by the end of 2018 – starting this October.

But there is a six-week waiting period for payments at the start of the process, and that risks pushing even more people into poverty.

Last week, I wrote to the Tory minister in charge of the system, David Gauke, to demand the roll-out of Universal Credit is halted.

The Tories need to listen to the warnings from Citizens Advice Scotland, which found that in areas where the new Universal Credit has been introduced, there has been a 15 per cent rise in rent arrears issues.

There is also a growing problem with the benefits cap, which the Tories have reduced to £20,000-per-household.

Labour tried to persuade them to exempt lone parents, so that we don't push more children into poverty by punishing them for their parents' circumstances. The Tories ignored us.

As a result, in Aberdeen North, 46 per cent of 'capped' households are single parents, rising to 49 per cent in Aberdeen South, 59 per cent in Moray, 72 per cent in Banff and Buchan and 76 per cent in Gordon.

The Tory MPs who now represent many of these areas should be knocking on Theresa May's door to force a rethink.

Much of our social security system rightly remains reserved to Westminster, ensuring that we can pool and share resources across the UK.

But the Scottish Parliament does now have the ability to make different decisions to the Tories.

For example, we could use Holyrood's social security powers to end cruel and inhumane assessments for the tens of thousands of disabled people who receive Disability Living Allowance as they move to new Personal Independence Payments (PIP).

Unfortunately, the SNP decided last year to ask the Tory Government to retain responsibility for certain benefits in Scotland until 2020.

That decision to delay the powers means that 130,000 Scots will be assessed under the current system. It is a dereliction of duty from the SNP and shows that Nicola Sturgeon is not serious when she promises to take a different approach to the Tories.

Similarly, SNP claims that Holyrood cannot provide assistance to the women born in the 1950s who have had their state pension age changed without fair notification have been exposed as false.

The Department for Work and Pensions has confirmed that Scottish ministers have the power to introduce 'discretionary payments', should they wish.

With the powers of the Scottish Parliament we can make different, fairer choices to those of a Tory government. That's what Labour would do.

And at the next General Election we can get rid of the Conservatives and elect a government that works for the many, not the few, across the entire United Kingdom.

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