

Ruth Davidson's speech to conference

4 Mar 2017



Below is the full text of Ruth Davidson's keynote speech to the Scottish Conservative conference.

"Thank-you conference for that wonderful welcome.

And thank-you to Glasgow for hosting us.

Being here takes me back to one of my very favourite moments of last year.

About six in the morning on May 6th.

Standing in the Royal Highland centre in Edinburgh as the votes are being counted.

Totally knackered.

And all over Scotland, the news has been coming in.

Aberdeenshire West – Alex Burnett, taking the seat off the SNP.

Eastwood – Jackson Carlaw, winning the seat from Labour.

Dumfriesshire – Oliver Mundell, triumphing over Joan McAlpine.

You know, some wins are just that little bit sweeter....

Five list seats bagged in the North-East.

John Scott winning in Ayr – John Scott ALWAYS wins in Ayr.

And then a phonecall from Glasgow.

Annie Wells saying they're just about to do the announcement and it's not just Adam Tomkins that's got in, she has, too.

The first time since devolution we've doubled our tally and got two MSPs here..

Now, I was always quietly confident about getting two in Glasgow.

But not everyone was.

I'll let you in on a secret.

Just between us.

Most of you will know that Annie used to work on the shop floor in her local

Marks and Sparks.

She went to the count on election night playing down her chances, and had to phone up her boss the next day saying she'd got a new job and was handing in her notice.

From the shop floor straight to the chamber floor of the Scottish Parliament – that's what I call checking out.

Annie Wells – not just an MSP... she's an M and S, MSP...

...

Conference, the Scottish Conservatives don't shy away from Glasgow, not any more – we win in Glasgow.

Because this party – the Scottish Conservative and Unionist party – is back.

THANKYOU

Conference, I want to start today by saying thank-you to all of you.

You, who brought us that success last May.

And particularly to those of you for whom that taste of success was a long time coming.

All around this hall, I see people whose service to this party eclipses my own.

Who fought for this party during the toughest of times.

Who took part in campaigns in the expectation of defeat – but did it anyway.

You know who you are.

You deserved last May's result more than anybody.

Because if it hadn't been for people like Alec Johnstone and Marjorie Borthwick fighting campaigns over the years, regardless of their chance of victory, we might not have even made it this far.

If people like Diana McKenzie, Hamish McLeod or Elizabeth Walsh had packed it in and decided we were a lost cause back in the day, it would now be up to Labour to defend the Union – and God knows WHERE we'd be.

If Mark McInnes and his brilliant team in Northumberland street hadn't kept churning out the leaflets

...or had stopped nagging candidates to keep doing their canvass

...or had let the regular street stalls slide

...or hadn't organised another fundraiser – then Nicola Sturgeon would right

now be even more cocky about her plans to separate our country in two.

...if that's even possible.

If it hadn't been for you – then this party, the only party which has the courage and the guts to stand up to the SNP – wouldn't be able to do that job right now.

So – from the bottom of my heart – thank you.

PROVIDING A STRONG OPPOSITION

And now – because of you – we CAN deliver.

Holding this failing and complacent SNP Government to account.

And providing the strong opposition this country needs.

Named persons – remember that? We – alone – said no. We – alone – demanded a re-think... the plans are now dumped in the long grass.

Just this week, we inflicted another defeat on the SNP in parliament over their plans for yet more centralisation, this time on education.

And last month on business rates – as hotels and pubs the length and breadth of Scotland were threatened with closure.....,

...with SNP Ministers refusing to listen

...in a campaign led brilliantly by Murdo Fraser, WE fought it tooth and nail and WE forced the SNP to think again.

It's opposition with a purpose.

Testing the arguments, demanding change, representing people who don't get heard...

...not moaning from the sidelines like Labour...

... but leading from the front – and forcing this incompetent SNP Government to wake up and deliver.

Doing the job for Scotland we promised we'd do.

And, you know what? We're getting stronger day by day.

31 of us in all.

24 new to the job.

Conference, we brought on enough MSPs last year to have a proper 11-a -side football match.

And, thanks to Douglas Ross, we've even got somebody to referee.

It's been an amazing few months, watching them grow in the job.

Men and women from all walks of life.

Not career politicians. But people who just wanted to do their bit.

And who – over these last few months – have found their voice.

Who have stepped up to the plate and discovered – you know what? – we can do this.

We're good at this.

And let me tell you something.

The Nationalists have noticed.

They've noticed we're not cowed. That we're proud of our beliefs.

And they've noticed that we're ready to take them on.

It really confuses them.

We're Tories. We're supposed to just lie down and get whacked.

Well, not this bunch, conference.

The old hands and the fresh blood – this group of Scottish Conservative MSPs aren't for backing down.

This group of Scottish Conservatives are confident in their beliefs, clear in their values, and determined to stand up to the SNP every step of the way.

Day in day out they are doing our party proud and our country proud – and I could not be more proud to lead them. I want everyone here today to give them our thanks for all the work that they are doing.

...

And then there's David Mundell, our Secretary of State for Scotland.

Getting on with the business of making sure that Scotland's voice is heard loud and clear in the UK government.

From his early days as a backbench MSP to taking his seat around the Cabinet table, David has been a stouthearted servant of party and country.

Never fazed by the incoming fire from SNP MPs, but quietly, effectively getting on with the job.

We couldn't do it without him. David, Thank you.

OFFERING AN ALTERNATIVE

But, conference, if there is one thing that doesn't change in politics – no

matter how frenzied things get – it's this.

You get no points for what you've done. No points for patting yourselves on the back.

It's always the next challenge that counts.

The next step is always the most important.

And so while it's been great this weekend to recognise last year's victories, it's time to focus on the future.

Last year's election already feels light years away. We remember it, we enjoyed it – but we must move on.

For a vital reason

Because our country requires us to.

Last week, at Labour's conference in Perth, we saw what happens to political parties when they turn in on themselves.

Unalloyed negativity; total chaos; and no plan for the future.

But here's the truth: the mess we're seeing in Labour right now only serves to emphasise the responsibility that now lies on our shoulders. Both here and across the UK.

As the only party capable of governing Britain – and thank goodness we have Theresa May at the helm, steering us forward at this time.

I thought the last guy was pretty good, but didn't we see yesterday what a superb and steadfast Prime Minister she is turning out to be.

And Labour's chaos means that, here in Scotland, there now can be only one party which can offer the challenge that's required to the Nationalists.

One party which can credibly look the Scottish people in the eye and offer the country a different path.

...which can speak to people – people who might once have put their faith in Labour or Liberal or the SNP – and offer them something fresh.

And we must.

Because those people – people who once cast their votes elsewhere – they are our people.

Their concerns are our concerns.

And their priorities over these coming years must now be our priorities too.

We must reach out to them, listen to them, to understand their needs.

And we must show them – that this party, the Conservative party, is the one that will stand up for them. That we are a government in waiting.

I'll be honest with you conference – we're not there yet. Not by a long shot. But by representing them, by serving them, we will reach that goal.

We're not in this for us. We're not a club. We're a party that aspires to govern for all of Scotland..

...a party that wants to show you don't have to pick between the old Labour-SNP establishment anymore.

...A party that says – the United Kingdom isn't a hindrance to Scotland's ambition, but the best way to realise it.

...A party that wants to champion aspiration, success, and old-fashioned Scottish get-up-and-go, and use that energy to tackle society's most intractable problems.

So we must now start, as a party, on that task.

And if we look at how,

We start by setting out clearly our purpose, our vision and the reasons why we are here, asking to serve.

OUR POLITICAL VISION

Conference, my reasons for getting into politics weren't forged in a boardroom, or in some kind of privileged dining club – my politics were forged in my Buckhaven High school classroom...

...A great school, with brilliant teachers, burning with ambition for their pupils...

...that gave me the chance to get on in life

...but where all around you, you could also see opportunities not being taken; potential not being realised; talents not being cradled...

...that wasn't the fault of the teachers, far from it – they went above and beyond to a man and woman...

...it was because it had been drummed into too many young people that to aspire was somehow wrong;

...that ambition was something only other people had;

...that we – the young people of Levenmouth and Kennoway and the Wemyss – we should just know our place, accept the way things are, settle for something second best.

And it is to challenge that – to change it – to bury that suffocating culture

of lumping your lot. That's why I joined the Conservative Party.

A party that says to every young person that your place is wherever you want it to be;

...that you don't have to just shrug and accept the way things are;

...that there is nothing that you can't do.

That asks people – yes, to take personal responsibility for their own lives – but that demands society offers them opportunity in return.

That takes what is best from our traditions, our country and our values – and uses that knowledge to ensure progress in the modern world.

Our purpose, our vision, our reason for being in politics is to ensure those same young people – the classmates I remember – can get on in life.

...it's to make Scotland the best place for them to study, to learn, to get a job, and to have the fulfilment they deserve.

And the sad truth is this.

For too many, Scotland is NOT that place right now.

Because, after ten years in office, this SNP Government has simply squandered the opportunity it has had to transform our country.

So let me set out where change must come.

And for those young people –for my classmates, my friends – it starts back in school.

EDUCATION REFORM

This SNP Government's handling of our education system over the last decade in power has been shameful – and change needs to happen.

Standards in reading, maths and science are now falling across the board in international surveys.

We do not perform above the international average in anything.

The Sutton Trust, a leading education charity, last month said this: "There is no specific area where able children in Scotland really excel."

What an absolute disgrace. What a mark of shame.

So much for your social justice, Nicola.

Now let me this clear: teachers are not to blame for this.

And you know what?: I'd like this conference, the Scottish Conservative conference, to record our thanks for the fantastic work they do day in day

out – in spite of the SNP incompetence that's hampering them from doing their job.

No. The blame lies with a school system that, thanks to this SNP Government, simply isn't working.

Here's the thing though: we can change this.

So today, I can announce we are going to undertake a root-and-branch review of one part of the system that is failing – and that is Curriculum for Excellence.

Here's what we're NOT going to do – teachers tell us they don't want yet another top-down reform, so we don't propose scrapping it altogether.

But what we have to do is to challenge the prevailing orthodoxy which has led to this collapse in standards.

... which thinks of facts and knowledge as of secondary importance

...which puts the latest fashionable theory before the basic need for a teacher to teach

...and which has left a generation of teachers, parents and pupils utterly confused about what is going on, or what Curriculum for Excellence even is.

Our review will insist on a better way.

Knowing this: that if we want to lift children out of poverty, they have no greater aid than an education that provides them with the knowledge and facts empowering them to do so.

We will report back with a set of practical recommendations.

But it is already clear: it is time to get rid of the waffle, and the theories that have failed – and restore Scotland's reputation as providing the best education in the world.

And we want more besides...

More innovation and freedom in our education system – so entrepreneurs like Jim McColl are encouraged, not put off, from building more brilliant junior colleges for kids who would otherwise leave school with nothing.

And when pupils have left school: more support where it's needed.

Let's never forget conference, that this SNP Government is the same government which slashed 150,000 College places so Alex Salmond could enjoy a photo-op with a rock.

Where the SNP guts vocational education, we say it is every bit as valuable as an academic one. So we would reverse those cuts.

For this simple reason.

Because we believe in opportunity.

We believe in a good education. In providing that positive start for all. And then handing on a country that shows our young people that they can grab those opportunities they crave.

That whatever course they want to plot, whichever industry they wish to pursue, whichever role they want to achieve, they can do that here at home.

And we have to ask ourselves, is Scotland, under the SNP, doing that?

The sad truth is again the same: no, it is not.

Economic growth: a third of what it is elsewhere in the UK.

Income taxes: now higher.

Business taxes: for many, doubling overnight.

What kind of message are we sending out?

Conference, I speak to job creators across Scotland every week. And they are worried...

...worried about an SNP Government gaining ever more power over our economy yet without an idea how to use it.

...and worried about a Scottish Government which has one plan for Brexit and one plan only – to use it to break up our United Kingdom.

Ask yourselves: is that the actions of a responsible government?

Look: you all know where I stand on our decision to leave the European Union.

And, if you don't, you can just ask Boris....

I'll be honest: I think the negotiations we face are going to be tough. We are going to be tested. It is not going to be easy.

But here's the difference between me and Nicola Sturgeon.

I want us to make a success of Brexit. She wants Britain to fail.

And irrespective of how I voted, I have to respect the result. She's never met a referendum she hasn't tried to overturn.

I say this here today – As we leave the EU, whether individually we were Remain or Leave, we deserve a Scottish Government that is focussed on helping Team UK get the best Brexit deal for all of us, not using it to revive its independence obsession.

Just look at our firms, small and large, manufacturing and services.

Across Scotland: are they wallowing in doom? No – they are planning how to

tackle challenges and exploit opportunities.

And that's been our positive plan too.

Last week, our own expert group on Brexit reported back.

Made up of Remainers AND Leavers – because this Conservative party believes in bringing our country back together.

And what they said is clear. It's this: you don't sort Brexit by splitting the UK. You deal with Brexit by sticking together.

I'm a democrat, conference: we accepted the rules, we must now accept the result and we move on to implement it.

And I think the right path is now clear.

We must keep Scotland competitive – with taxes no higher than the rest of the UK.

We must keep Scotland in our own Union – so we can benefit from our own internal market.

And we must put all our efforts into striking a free trade deal with Europe to ensure our firms can continue to thrive.

And we need our Governments in both Edinburgh and London to seek out new markets for Scottish goods.

Because the potential for growth is enormous.

Our trade with the rest of the world is already more than the whole of the EU

And – if we really put our mind to it – Scotland's rest of the world exports could be double those to Europe over the coming years.

The fact is Scotland has the brilliant products and the high-end services that the world wants.

It's now our job to go out and sell them.

Wouldn't it be lovely, conference, if we had a Scottish Government that sought to use this time to talk up what we COULD do, rather than find or create all that we can't?

Wouldn't it be nice if we had a Scottish Government that focussed on how to grow Scotland's success in the coming years?

I say to the SNP:

Stop talking Scotland down – and go out to the world and talk our prospects up for once.

IGNORING THE DAY JOB

You know, when I look at our SNP Government, the truth is it just frustrates me.

All that energy, all that sense of purpose, all that work – and so little going where it's needed.

Not in education – only this week, John Swinney has delayed his reforms yet again.

Not on the economy. Where their answer to low growth is to tax firms more.

And not in so many other areas too.

Our job as Scotland's opposition has been to show there is an alternative.

In just the last six months:

We've campaigned – successfully – for more of NHS funding to go to family doctors – so we can tackle the nation's poor health at source.

We've set out a plan to cut Air Passenger Duty for long-haul – so Scotland can be better connected to the world.

We've set out a raft of proposals to finally achieve parity between mental and physical health treatment – and, crucially, to reduce health inequality.

And only last week, we set out a new paper making it clear that economic growth must go hand in hand with care for our environment.

But we must do more.

The NHS. Doctors and nurses doing their best from one day to the next. What's the SNP's plan?

To keep it going until the next winter crisis, or until after the next election, in the hope staff keep staggering on despite growing demand and ever higher expectations.

It's not good enough.

We need a long-term strategy which sets the course for the NHS to prosper for the rest of this century – not short term political fixes

So, led by Donald Cameron, our new health spokesman, we will soon announce our plans for a new independent advisory board on the NHS and social care – made up of practitioners, not placemen – to deliver a real long-term vision for our health service.

To offer a bold vision of how the founding values of the NHS can be renewed for the modern age.

And what about Local Government. What's the SNP's plan there?

It's to scoop up as much power as you can, and try and control everything

from the centre.

It's not good enough.

You know where our challenge is coming from in local government?

It's coming from thriving metropolitan areas in Manchester, in Birmingham, in Liverpool.

And what Scotland needs isn't more local powers flowing to our First Minister: we need more powerful local leaders in OUR great cities to take on the Northern Powerhouse and the Midlands Engine.

Scotland's growth levels are lagging behind the UK and have done so for the last 3 years.

More centralisation isn't the answer to this – in fact, centralisation is the cause of this.

So in our manifesto for the Local Government elections we will be setting out plans to empower councils and give them a renewed purpose.

With a greater role to deliver economic growth – with incentives so local areas keep the rewards from that growth.

And, crucially, given more control over the way money is raised and spent.

Real devolution: not just to Holyrood, but to the communities and cities that matter.

NO TO INDYREF2

Conference, I think in short – we've all just had enough of the SNP saying what CAN'T be done. We want a government that says YES, YES I CAN, for once. Instead, what do we get?

Moaning about Westminster...when it's not Westminster in charge.

Complaining they don't have the cash – only to find millions down the back of the sofa.

Admitting things maybe haven't gone so well...but then saying they just need more time.

I say: you've had your time and if you can't act, or won't act, then it's time somebody else had a go.

Because we need to focus on the massive challenges of the next thirty years

How automation will increasingly change the very nature of work in this country.

How an ageing population is going to challenge our welfare state.

How public services can reform so they don't just mop up social problems, but intervene before those problems happen in the first place.

Can you even imagine this spin-drenched, short-termist SNP Government thinking about issues like that?

You want to know why I'm so determined to oppose a second referendum on independence?

Yes, it's because I don't want to see my country go through all the turmoil and the division we suffered three years ago.

Yes, it's because I will defend Scotland's place in the UK it helped build and has ownership of all my days, and don't want to see it threatened again.

But, it's also because of what we're NOT doing when our thoughts turn inwards.

...when we head down the constitutional cul-de-sac once again.

NOT sorting out our schools.

NOT dealing with a plan for our NHS.

NOT delivering economic growth, NOT empowering local government, NOT focusing on people's priorities.

How many more years, conference, can Scotland afford to spend time NOT properly addressing these things that matter?

How much longer do we have to put up with a Nationalist party that puts ITS grievance-hunting agenda, before all OUR priorities.

And for whom?

You know, the SNP claim to speak for our country, but they don't half turn a deaf ear to the actual people of Scotland.

Apparently "WE" need a referendum to assert our national identity. Forgetting that fewer than one in three of us say we actually want a referendum at all.

Here's the hard truth. The voices of the people of Scotland only matter to Nicola Sturgeon when they're saying something she already agrees with.

Don't agree with the SNP? Then your voice doesn't matter to them – you don't count.

Are you as sick and tired as I am of their arrogance?

Are you as angry as I am that the result of a democratic vote – one that the SNP promised to respect just 3 years ago – is being torn up in front of our eyes?

Yes, they're the government.

They've got the Ministerial offices and the chauffeured cars.

But they work for us, the people of Scotland.

And the people of Scotland are telling them loud and clear...

You're not on.

We don't share your constitutional obsession.

Not when Scotland's children are being failed by your mishandling of our schools.

Not when waiting times in our NHS are lengthening and tens of thousands of operations are being cancelled.

Not when violent crime in our communities is on the rise.

We don't want the next year, and the year after that, and the year after that, taken up with another independence referendum

We want you to do the job you were elected to do...

To address the issues that really matter.

...To make our schools better, our hospitals, our economy and the lives of all our people.

Scotland said no to independence.

Scotland is saying – stop trying to bounce us into another referendum.

And I can promise you this.

This party – the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party – will never waver in our determination to stand up for the decision we made as a country. We will fight you every step of the way.

We said no.

We meant it.

Are you listening, Nicola Sturgeon?

No. Second. Referendum.

NATIONALISTS SHOULD TELL THE TRUTH ON INDEPENDENCE

And let me say this to the First Minister as well.

There's been a lot of talk since Labour's conference last weekend about the language we use in political debate.

It's a fair question and we should all seek to live up to our own standards.

But I'm sick of the SNP's double-standards on this.

So when SNP figures attack the other side, I simply say this: it's time you lived by the same rules that you apply to others.

When you accuse pro-Union figures of distorting the truth...

...please, show Scotland some respect by giving us the truth on the cost of breaking our Union in two.

When you attack my party over the need to balance the country's books...

... give Scotland the truth about the cuts your policies would incur if we backed independence.

And when you try to portray Britain as an insular country, as something different or other, to us here in Scotland...

... take a moment to look around you.

Look at the staff in East Kilbride just down the road, delivering British Aid and Development money to some of the poorest nations on the planet.

Reflect on the troops at Lossiemouth, at Leuchars, at Faslane, defending democracy and advancing liberty 24-7, 365 days a year – in our name.

Consider what this country – at its best – gives us.

A country which punches above its weight on the world stage – economically, culturally and in the humanitarian aid of others.

A country which gives a girl from Glasgow, microphone in hand, the chance to stand up in the White House and challenge the most powerful man in the world to explain his abhorrent views on Muslims and gay people...

I know our country has its faults, conference.

But I tell the SNP, as you choose to denigrate the UK to advance your cause, don't dare claim that Britain isn't a land worth living in.

...nor that thousands of our fellow Scots want to stay open to the world as part of it.

Because you only diminish yourselves in doing so.

So, conference, I urge you to take this message to people over the coming weeks as we head to elections once again.

That this SNP Government is failing Scotland.

And that this Scottish Conservative party is ready to serve.

Ready to demand a politics that no longer obsesses over the colour of a flag

...but rather focuses on the content of our lives.

I will always stand up for the decision we made 3 years ago; but the truth is, I wish I didn't have to. I'd be the happiest woman alive if I didn't have to talk about the constitution one more time.

Not because my love for this country has diminished – far from it.

But because none of us – Unionist or Nationalist – none of us serve anyone by re-fighting old battles.

We've been down that road before.

And what have we got to show for it?

A divided country, a neglected politics, a Scottish government that has now simply lost all grip on the things that really matter.

Scotland deserves better than this.

It deserves better than “would”, and “could” and “may”.

It is time for “will” and “can” and “must”.

And conference, the responsibility falls to us.

We CAN be that better government.

We MUST be that better government.

We WILL be that better government.

That's our ambition – nothing less.

Though we know it won't come easy.

Conference, we've had a busy few years.

An independence referendum...

A general election...

A Scottish Parliament election...

Hundreds of streets walked.

Thousands of doors knocked.

And with every step we've grown as a party. Hundreds of thousands of Scots have listened to our message, have seen our commitment and have put their trust in us.

And over the next few weeks...

...and in the months and years ahead...

...I'm asking you to do it all again.

Because we know what's on the ballot paper.

We know what's at stake.

...The prosperity of Scotland's families.

...The education of Scotland's children.

...Our place in the United Kingdom.

I'm up for that fight.

I know you are too.

So let's get out there – and get the job done.

Thank you.