

Schools suffer while SNP drags Scotland down indyref 'rabbit hole'

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23 May 2018



The education of Scotland's youngsters will suffer if the SNP drags Scotland "back down the rabbit hole" of another independence debate.

Speaking ahead of the launch of Nicola Sturgeon's separation blueprint tomorrow, Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson pointed to a series of education failings which have occurred on the SNP's watch.

And she warned these would worsen if the SNP government restarted the bid to break up Britain, neglecting domestic priorities in the process.

At First Minister's Questions today, it was revealed fewer pupils are sitting key STEM subjects – specifically biology, chemistry, maths and physics – than in 2014.

The SNP's pledge to cut class sizes in primaries one to three to a maximum of 18 pupils has also failed, Ruth added.

In Nicola Sturgeon's own constituency just four of 91 classes meet that promise.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

"The First Minister used to claim education was her top priority – but the evidence points to the contrary.

"It's hard to see how dragging Scotland back down the rabbit hole of a debate on independence is going to improve our schools.

"Not only are fewer pupils taking Highers in key STEM subjects, fewer are getting those Highers than in 2014.

"The SNP also said cutting class sizes was a priority, yet a tiny fraction of classes now meet their pledge.

"This is typical of the SNP. It makes promises to get elected and abandons them as soon as they become inconvenient.

"But there is one issue the nationalists will never put aside, as the launch of their latest separation blueprint proves.

“Nicola Sturgeon has made clear what her priorities are – it’s independence first and everything else a long way behind.

“It’s no wonder the people of Scotland want her to give it a rest.”

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23 May 2018



The dwindling number of subjects pupils are able to take hits those who wish to leave school at an earlier age the hardest, the Scottish Conservatives have said.

Speaking in a debate in Holyrood today, shadow education secretary Liz Smith said there had been a huge increase in the number of schools who were now restricting the number of courses in S4 from the traditional eight down to six.

She pointed to statistics showing 57 per cent of schools only offer six subjects for children in S4 to take.

In 2013, that figure was 28 per cent.

And it means those who choose to leave school before sitting Highers will do so with fewer qualifications to their name than ever, hampering their chances of employment, apprenticeships or a college place.

The debate took place as part of Scottish Conservative business, and followed leader Ruth Davidson raising the issue with Nicola Sturgeon at First Minister’s Questions last week.

The fact there are 3400 fewer teachers from when the SNP came to power has also been blamed for a lack of subject choice.

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Liz Smith said:

“Few decisions are more important to any young person at school than those they make about subject choice.

“However, we’ve become concerned – along with parents and teachers – about

evidence which points to the range of choices at S4 level being restricted.

“This impacts everyone, but particularly those who want to leave school at the end of S4 or S5 who will now do so with fewer qualifications than would otherwise be the case.

“There is a marked effect on many young people attending schools in disadvantaged communities – something about which we should all be very concerned in terms of widening access.

“One key part of this is teacher numbers.

“We cannot hope to offer effective subject choice if we have 3400 fewer teachers in the system.”

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The economy is facing a ‘Scotland-specific economic shock’ – a term enshrined in law, used to describe a set of poor economic indicators that only apply to north of the border.

This was confirmed by Andrew Chapman from the Scottish Government Fiscal Responsibility Division at the Holyrood Finance and Constitution Committee this morning.

The 2016 Fiscal Framework states that a ‘Scotland-specific economic shock’ is when annual Scottish GDP growth is both below one per cent, and one percentage point below GDP growth in the UK.

This can be based on either projections, or the most recent backwards-looking outturn data. The annual growth rate can be based on any four quarters, compared to the next four quarters.

The Scottish Government’s most recent GDP statistics state that Scottish GDP grew by 0.75 per cent between the whole year of 2016 and the whole year of 2017 – meeting the first criteria.

In the same period, UK growth was 1.78 per cent, so the full gap between the

Scottish and UK growth was 1.03 per cent.

Between 2016 and 2017, the Scottish economy therefore met both criteria for a 'Scotland specific economic shock'.

If these criteria were met for just one more quarter, then additional borrowing powers could be triggered by the Scottish Fiscal Commission.

Murdo Fraser, Scottish Conservative shadow finance secretary said:

"This clearly highlights the scale of the economic crisis Scotland is currently in.

"The criteria for a 'Scotland-specific economic shock' has been met.

"There is no room for excuses from Nicola Sturgeon – this is a shock made in Bute House.

"The SNP has failed to energise the economy, preferring to write strategies and create quangos rather than deal with the systemic issues Scotland faces.

"It is absolutely clear that the last thing Scotland's economy now needs is another divisive referendum.

"The SNP's independence referendum plan will not distract the Scottish public from Scotland's grim economic performance.

"Surely now the SNP must wake up, stop penalising Scots with tax increases, focus on productivity and start encouraging businesses."

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The dwindling number of subjects school pupils can choose from should trigger a parliamentary inquiry, the Scottish Conservatives have said.

Leader Ruth Davidson described the situation as a "scandal" at First Minister's Questions today, after it emerged the majority of schools only offer six choices to S4 pupils.

In addition, an inequalities gap has also been revealed.

In schools in wealthy parts of the country, children have a 70 per cent of being able to choose between 12 or more Advanced Highers.

However, just two schools in Scotland's most deprived zones have those same opportunities.

Instead of addressing the issue today, Nicola Sturgeon spoke about pass rates generally, and refused to engage in the issue of subject choice.

She also failed to back the idea of a parliamentary inquiry into the problem.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

"The restriction of subject choice in secondary schools is a scandal.

"This SNP government is curtailing the ability of our young people to pursue the same broad-based education generations before – including the First Minister's – benefitted from.

"And pupils in our poorest areas are hardest hit.

"The situation is now so serious that we need a parliamentary inquiry to not only expose the failings of this SNP government over the last 11 years, but to enact some solutions too.

"Nicola Sturgeon claims education is her number one priority, but she had no answers for pupils, teachers or parents.

"Her government is failing miserably on this and many other counts, and voters are running out of patience."

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16 May 2018



Peter Chapman MSP has today resigned as the Scottish Conservative party spokesman on rural affairs.

The regional list member for the north-east informed party leader Ruth Davidson by letter of his intention to step down earlier today.

Mr Chapman spoke last week to several members of Aberdeenshire Council's Garioch Area Committee about a planning application from the Aberdeen and Northern Marts (ANM) Group.

At the request of ANM, Mr Chapman asked councillors to support the application for an expansion of the mart at Thainstone Business Centre, Inverurie.

As a local farmer, the MSP is a member of the farming co-operative. He owns 50,000 shares in the group.

The investment is not linked to the company's performance, and he would not stand to gain anything if the expansion were to go ahead. All shareholders accrue interest at 2% above the base rate (0.5%) per annum.

Mr Chapman said he had failed to declare his interests in the conversations with councillors, which took place prior to a meeting to discuss the application.

In his letter, Mr Chapman said: "It's quite clear with hindsight that I should have made my financial interest in the phone calls clear and that it was a foolish oversight on my behalf not to do so.

"I failed to maintain the high standards of transparency that is expected of MSPs.

"As a result, I cannot in all conscience continue in post, hence my reason for offering my resignation.

"It was not my intention to hide this – indeed anyone can see the details of my investment on the Scottish Parliament register of interests.

"I can say hand on heart that my only thought was to support a local business and improve our local economy.

"I deeply regret this incident and I only hope people will see it for what it is: an honest mistake taken while trying to help my local constituents and the Aberdeenshire economy."

In response, Ms Davidson said that it was "with regret" that she has accepted his resignation.

She added: "Your commitment to this brief over the last two years has been admirable, combining all your decades of experience in the agriculture industry with your history of service to Scotland's farmers as a former NFUS vice president.

"While I fully accept that you acted in this instance on behalf of your constituent to promote local employment – to no financial benefit yourself – it is a mark of your integrity that you choose to step down, rather than

allow for any hint of impropriety.

“I know your strong commitment in all things is to your constituents in the North East, and that you will continue to serve them with vigour over the months and years ahead.”