

Action needed to avoid politicisation of civil service

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11 Feb 2018



Scottish Conservatives have called for action to be taken to ensure that the Scottish civil service remains impartial.

Scottish Conservative MSP Donald Cameron has written to the Permanent Secretary, Leslie Evans, calling for an end to the 'slow erosion of robust attitudes to impartiality and objectivity'.

It comes after it was revealed this week that John Swinney personally intervened in the content of FOI releases, and that Special Advisers routinely screen Freedom of Information requests for political content.

There have been a number of other incidents where the lines between politicians and civil servants have become blurred over the past eighteen months.

These include civil servants working under Swinney contacting witnesses ahead of appearances at a committee of the Scottish Parliament, and graphics being tweeted by Scottish Government accounts which used the SNP's party political language on Brexit.

In his letter, Highlands & Islands MSP Donald Cameron writes:

"I do not doubt the commitment of individual civil servants to public service.

"But the cumulative impression of these instances is enough to doubt the culture and leadership of the civil service.

"They paint a picture of creeping laxness, and the slow erosion of robust attitudes to impartiality and objectivity.

"The civil service must not just act above party politics; it must avoid even the impression of politicisation.

"It is hard to see how that impression can currently be maintained.

"As the head of the Scottish Civil service, I look to you for a response – and reassurance that action will be taken to address this situation."

[Scottish Conservatives offer to help SNP pass reform to police structures](#)

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- Scottish Conservatives offer to help SNP pass reform to police structures

9 Feb 2018



The Scottish Conservatives have said the SNP should pass a new law to increase oversight of Scottish policing – and have offered to “donate” their parliamentary time to help.

There is a parliamentary majority for creating a greater role for the Scottish Parliament in the appointment of the chair of the Scottish Police Authority.

If the SNP wanted to, it could bring forward a bill immediately. With the current schedule of legislation, and with the support of all political parties, that could likely be passed this year.

Opposition parties have regular debating slots, and if more time is needed to pass an SPA reform bill, the Scottish Conservatives have offered to lend some of their time.

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Liam Kerr said:

“Susan Deacon is widely respected, but what we’ve learnt is that this goes far deeper than one person – this is an issue about wider governance and structures.

“All opposition parties want to increase the independence of the SPA, and Nicola Sturgeon has hinted that she’s open to the idea.

“But her warning that it would take new laws rings hollow. If the SNP wants to bring forward a bill, then it could do it in days.

“And if it needs more debating time – we’ll donate some of our opposition time to sorting out the mess.

“We’re now putting our money where our mouth is. So should Nicola Sturgeon.”

SNP's £500k a day on NHS agency staff

9 Feb 2018



The SNP is spending nearly £500k per day on agency staff in the Scottish NHS, it has been revealed.

The figure emerged following a parliamentary question by shadow health secretary Miles Briggs, and shows more than £171 million was paid out to private agencies last year.

And while it's a small decrease from last year, this still represents double the amount spent when the SNP came to office in 2007.

Despite protestations against private funding in the NHS, the SNP has increased agency funding to record levels.

Several health boards have seen dramatic increases in their spending on agency staff, including Ayrshire and Arran where there was an increase of almost £3 million, and Grampian where the figure rose by £4 million.

Scottish Conservative shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said:

"Agency staff are really important in our NHS as they are flexible and can fill short-term staffing gaps, as well as reducing waiting lists.

"However the SNP mismanagement of the NHS has clearly led to a long term reliance on agency staff at very high cost.

"These figures expose the utter hypocrisy of the SNP as it has consistently spoken against private involvement in the NHS whilst spending half a million pounds each day to agency staff.

"The SNP has totally failed to ensure that staffing levels in the NHS are sufficient, and with morale at rock bottom among doctors and nurses, this will only get worse.

"It's time the SNP took responsibility for this situation, get on with the day job, and make sure our NHS has enough staff to function properly".

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8 Feb 2018



The Scottish Conservatives are calling for the parliamentary business minister, Joe Fitzpatrick to return to Holyrood and explain his previous answers on freedom of information requests, as evidence suggests he may have misled the Scottish Parliament.

In June 2017 Mr Fitzpatrick was asked if “freedom of information responses were being screened for potential political damage by special advisers” to which he replied: “No.”

Yet evidence uncovered today has shown that Scottish Government freedom of information requests are routinely reviewed and amended by special advisers for political purposes, not accuracy.

Indeed, in one email chain Deputy First Minister John Swinney is referred to as requesting certain documents are not included in the freedom of information response, for political purposes.

Commenting on the minister’s responses Scottish Conservative MSP Edward Mountain said:

“We now know that the answer given by Mr Fitzpatrick to the Scottish Parliament are not true.

“The evidence suggests that special advisors are routinely involved in the freedom of information process for political purposes and John Swinney himself is suppressing documents when it suits him.

“Mr Fitzpatrick categorically denied this on the floor of the Scottish Parliament.

“Joe Fitzpatrick must return to the Scottish Parliament immediately and explain these responses.

“It appears this may well be a breach of the Ministerial Code of Conduct. It is entirely unethical for a Scottish minister to mislead the Scottish Parliament.”

[Gap widens between rich and poor student applications to university](#)

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- Gap widens between rich and poor student applications to university

5 Feb 2018



Figures published by UCAS today show that Scottish applications to university are flatlining.

The report, analysing full-time undergraduate numbers, also shows that the gap in applications to university between students from rich and poor backgrounds is increasing, that the number of school leavers applying to sciences and engineering has dropped and that the numbers of non-EU (international) students applying to Scottish universities have increased more markedly than other groups.

The statistics also show that the percentage of 18 year old Scottish applicants living in disadvantaged areas in Scotland, decreased this year, from 17 per cent to 16.7 per cent of total applicants.

In stark contrast the application rate for the most advantaged areas in Scotland increased by 1.9 per cent – a widening gap between the most and least deprived areas.

In addition, the number of school leavers going into sciences and engineering has dropped by 780.

Lastly, EU applications have also increased by 40 while non-EU applications have increased by 2,500.

Commenting on the findings, Liz Smith Scottish Conservative Shadow Education Secretary said:

“Scotland’s future prosperity and the success of its young people depends on a thriving university sector therefore the trends within these latest statistics are important.

“Given the financial constraints under which universities are operating and the resulting pressure to increase the number of fee-paying students it is perhaps not surprising to see the growth in the number of international applicants.

“At the same time, it appears that the number of Scots domiciled students applying to university has started to flatline and it is particularly worrying to see a drop in the number of students applying for STEM courses and a drop in the number of Scottish students applying to university from disadvantaged backgrounds.

“In both cases, the SNP tells us it is addressing these issues as a matter of priority but these statistics tell a different story. That is because the SNP has not had the necessary focus on these issues within its schools policy. That must change.”