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- Swinney must provide answers to witness tampering allegations, say Scottish Conservatives

5 Feb 2018



The Scottish Conservatives are seeking clarification from education secretary John Swinney on allegations his government proactively lobbied witnesses due to give evidence to a Holyrood committee.

The Education and Skills Committee was taking evidence from organisations regarding the controversial Named Persons scheme in October 2017.

Freedom of Information responses show that the Scottish Government sought out specific witnesses after they have submitted written evidence but before giving oral evidence to the committee.

When questioned at a previous committee John Swinney said that these were just “routine meetings”, adding: “I have seen organisations come here and express their concerns. I have then gone away and had various discussions with people so that I can better understand their perspective.”

The organisations included Police Scotland, Colleges Scotland, Aberlour, Action for Children and Includem. Subsequently Aberlour, Action for Children and Includem changed their submissions.

The committee has now written to Mr Swinney asking him to explain this strategy and asked for a response prior to the next meeting on the February 7.

Scottish Conservative MSP Oliver Mundell, a member of the Education and Skills Committee, said:

“The education secretary must provide full answers to the allegations that his officials have been seeking meetings with witnesses prior to committee evidence sessions.

“These were clearly not routine meetings and several organisations changed their submissions as a result.

“Anyone reading those emails will think that the Scottish Government has been

lobbying organisations to change testimony that they don't like.

"John Swinney now has to prove that this is not the case.

"The Named Persons policy is badly thought out; sending the Scottish Government attack dogs to coerce witnesses will not change the public's mind."

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4 Feb 2018



Scotland's main enterprise body could be without a chief executive for a full year, it has been revealed.

Former boss of Scottish Enterprise Lena Wilson confirmed her departure in July last year.

However, in a statement to Holyrood, economy secretary Keith Brown confirmed the deadline for applications for her replacement was on January 5, with the recruitment process expected to take another six months to conclude.

The delay has been criticised by shadow economy secretary Dean Lockhart, who said the "dragging of heels" by the SNP was more proof of its anti-business approach.

And in his response to the parliamentary question from Mr Lockhart, the minister added it could be even longer than six months "subject to the successful candidate's notice period".

Earlier this year, the Scottish Conservatives revealed how Scottish Enterprise has spent £100 million in the last decade on firms which went bust shortly after.

Ms Wilson's tenure has also been attacked after it emerged she was supplementing her £210,000-a-year job with other board member roles.

Scottish Conservative shadow economy secretary Dean Lockhart said:

"At a time when Scotland's economy is struggling, it's completely

unacceptable that Scotland's enterprise agency could be rudderless for up to a year.

"It's more proof that this SNP government is not serious about business or the economy.

"The role of the Scottish Enterprise chief is critically important.

"For the SNP government to be dragging its heels in this way is damaging for the economy, and for the many start-ups who rely on the organisation.

"Yet again we have further evidence of why, under the SNP, Scotland's economy is facing its longest period of weak growth for more than 60 years."

[Plans to create environmental court to help communities and the countryside](#)

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- Plans to create environmental court to help communities and the countryside

4 Feb 2018



Scotland should create an environmental court, which would allow communities to contest government decisions on major windfarm applications and quickly resolve issues like pollution of rivers and the wider countryside.

The policy commitment from the Scottish Conservatives would also see a streamlining of environmental cases which currently take too long to progress through current court processes.

Shadow environment secretary Donald Cameron said the move would improve access to justice for people in rural communities, and organisations working to safeguard Scotland's environment.

As it stands, most environmental disputes are heard in courts with no specific environmental expertise, and can often prove too expensive to pursue.

For example, in 2016 the John Muir Trust had to abandon an appeal in relation to a 67-turbine windfarm after being faced with legal bills of £500,000.

Creating a specific environmental court, the Scottish Conservatives said, would improve efficiency, have a wider positive impact on the environment,

and create a fairer balance between those defending and launching cases.

Following the UK's decision to leave the European Union, a replacement for the role played in environmental cases by both the European Commission and the EU's Court of Justice will be required.

Under the Scottish Conservative plans, one possibility is for an environmental court to be part of the Scottish Land Court, which already holds some environmental jurisdictions and is used for specialist lay members sitting with legally qualified judges.

Scottish Conservative shadow environment secretary Donald Cameron said:

"Creating a one-stop shop for environmental disputes would make life significantly easier for communities and environmental organisations.

"As it stands, when a group wants to appeal a major windfarm decision taken by the Scottish Government, or a village wants to stop pollution of a local river, the pathway to actually doing this is often complex, expensive and drawn-out.

"But now we have the chance to do something to directly help such people, and making the justice system much fairer when it comes to environmental issues.

"We can see examples where major environmental cases have fallen because those appealing simply can't afford to go all the way through traditional court routes.

"That's unfair, denies access to justice, and has to change.

"We're forever hearing of the challenges Brexit will pose, usually from the SNP government.

"Well, this is an opportunity once Britain leaves the EU for Scotland to lead the way when it comes to environmental justice."

[Now SNP-Green alliance plots council tax raid](#)

1 Feb 2018



Nicola Sturgeon has refused to rule out the prospect of future tax hikes – this time in the form of a Green-inspired council tax raid.

At First Minister's Questions today, Ruth Davidson asked whether or not such

increases were on the horizon in exchange for the Green Party helping through Scottish budgets.

The Scottish Conservative leader highlighted a statement made by Green “co-convener” Patrick Harvie yesterday, in which he said he wanted “meaningful progress on local tax reform”.

Translated, Ruth said, this meant the Greens were setting the scene for increases in council tax for hundreds of thousands of Scots.

And at today’s exchange, Mr Harvie himself again stressed he wanted to see more action from the SNP government in hiking the amount paid by taxpayers into local government finances.

But instead of rejecting the idea, Nicola Sturgeon said the Scottish Conservatives were on the “wrong side of public opinion” on hiking tax.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

“The Greens got the SNP’s budget through last year, and they got it through this year.

“Patrick Harvie has made it pretty clear his price for next year’s budget will be hiking up council tax.

“Nicola Sturgeon had ample opportunity to rule this out, but refused.

“That will set alarm bells ringing in the homes of thousands of families right across the country.

“People in Scotland are already being charged more tax to buy a home, and more tax on their income.

“They should not have to accept the SNP-Green alliance raiding their council tax too.”

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- Ruth addresses Brexit and SNP’s weak economy in David Hume speech

30 Jan 2018



Ruth Davidson will this evening call for a positive approach to the challenges and opportunities thrown up by Brexit – and a renewed focus from the SNP government on delivering lasting economic growth in Scotland.

In her David Hume Institute Lecture, the Scottish Conservative leader says that UK and Scottish governments need to work together where possible to deliver Brexit and to boost Scottish jobs.

She also proposes some ideas to help boost Scotland for when Brexit takes place, such as a new environmental court based in Scotland and a new system of agricultural support to support Scotland's rural economy.

An environmental court would simplify the current system – offering people easier access to environmental justice similar to the current Scottish Land Court.

On a replacement for the Common Agricultural Policy after Brexit, Ruth calls for a more streamlined system which ensures funding is directed to farmers in less favoured areas in Scotland.

Ahead of tomorrow's budget debate, she also warns that increasing taxes on ordinary workers in Scotland – as supported by the SNP, Labour, Lib Dems and Greens – will only deter investment in Scotland leading to less, not more, money for vital public services.

On economic growth, she says:

"In December, the Scottish Fiscal Commission predicted a growth rate of less than 1 per cent until 2021.

"To put that in some context, research has found this is literally the lowest projected growth rate in the developed world – lower than every other OECD, G20 and EU nation.

"If this does indeed play out, the impact on all of us will be enormous.

"To give a flavour – after the Fiscal Commission revised February's projected growth rates down in December, it reduced our expected income tax receipts over the next four years by fully £2 billion.

"In other words, thanks to lower than expected growth, that's £2 billion less going into fund schools and hospitals – just as the very moment that an ageing population pushes the cost of public services ever higher.

"I would suggest – to put it mildly – Brexit or no Brexit, hard of soft, we need to act with some urgency – because increasing prosperity is the single most effective way of improving people's lives."

On Brexit, she says:

"While it may not seem like it – especially this week – there will be life after Brexit.

“There is no excuse for inaction here in Scotland.

“As the Fraser of Allander Institute has noted: ‘With any Brexit uncertainty affecting the UK as well, it’s hard to argue that Scotland’s relatively weaker performance can be explained by the outcome of the EU referendum.’

“With Brexit comes new choices – and we must start actively preparing the ground to take advantage of those choices where we can.”

“More importantly, with the huge powers at the Scottish Government’s disposal, we must capitalise on Scotland’s strengths in research and innovation to deliver lasting economic growth.

“We must look to ourselves – and if all we hear from Scottish ministers here is a counsel of despair, we will miss the opportunities which are in our grasp.

“We must ask how we can contribute, not recriminate.”

On an environmental court, she says:

“Brexit does provide a moment when we can make these changes – to ensure that power is held closer to people in Scotland and the UK.”

“Right now, environmental justice in Scotland is utterly inefficient – with some cases heard in courts, some by ministers and others in the Court of Session.”

“Creating a new Environmental Court would allow the judiciary to develop an expertise in environmental law and science, helping to ensure people can get redress where it’s right to do so.”

On farmers’ support, she says:

“We can take this chance to simplify administration in Scotland – so we can be spared a repeat of the IT fiasco we’ve seen over recent years.”

“And we need a system that takes into account our specific needs. The vast majority of land in Scotland is classed as less favoured area. In contrast, for example, to England where it is only 15 per cent.

“So we will be pushing for a system in Scotland that really targets support for low income farmers in some of our most remote communities.”

“That’s support which, in many cases, helps to ensure that rural communities in Scotland can continue to thrive and can retain young people living there.”