

Sturgeon putting independence before public services

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26 Jan 2017



Nicola Sturgeon has been told to take responsibility for the nurse staffing crisis which has led to cancelled operations and empty theatres – instead of agitating for another referendum.

As health secretary, she cut student nursing numbers in two successive years, a decision she today said she stood by.

However, this week it has emerged hospitals have had to cancel procedures because of a lack of workers, and desperate health boards are forking out up to £1500 for agency nurse shifts.

And even after announcing a modest increase in student numbers for next year, the Royal College of Nursing said yesterday this still wouldn't meet demand, adding: "It is not enough to say that there are more nurses or that today's intake figures are the highest in years."

At First Minister's Questions, Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said Ms Sturgeon should "confront the failings of 10 years" rather than obsessing about independence.

Ruth asked, were the First Minister to have her time again, would she still have cut those nursing numbers in 2010 and 2011.

Instead of admitting that error, she said: "We took decisions on the data available at the time."

This is despite both nursing bodies and opposition parties warning the cuts would come back to haunt the NHS.

Ruth also raised the example of north east patient Hugh Falconer, who was put on an urgent referral for treatment and told he would receive surgery within 12 weeks.

However, he's since been informed that the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary can't perform the surgery, and patients are no longer being referred to the waiting times back-up facility in Glasgow.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said: "We have a Scottish Government which puts its failing independence obsession before an NHS crisis

of its own making.

“The First Minister asks what sort of country we want to be: I want a country run by a government that does the job we pay it to do – to look after Scotland’s public services.

“Instead, we have one obsessed with a narrow nationalist project that has had its day.

“Six years ago, as health secretary, Nicola Sturgeon embarked on catastrophic cuts to student nursing places.

“She was warned by nursing leaders and opposition parties of the short-sightedness of this approach, and the impact it would have on patient care.

“Now, as predicted, patients are paying the price as routine operations are cancelled and treatment waiting times grow – all because of staff shortages.

“People want a country run by a Scottish Government that spends its every waking hour sorting out public services like the NHS – not obsessing about another referendum, or stoking up Brexit divisions.

“It’s time for her to confront the failings of the last decade of this SNP government, and set out clear plans on how she intends to tackle them.”

RCN Scotland said the SNP was “failing to futureproof” Scotland’s nursing workforce:

<https://www.rcn.org.uk/news-and-events/news/student-nurse-intake-numbers-25-jan-2017>

Student nursing numbers have fallen under the SNP:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2014/12/student-nursing-numbers-hit-new-low/>

Earlier this week, the Scottish Conservatives revealed desperate health boards are paying up to £1500 per shift to agencies to cover staff shortages:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2017/01/agency-nurses-paid-more-than-1500-a-shift/>

It has been reported that operations are being cancelled as a result of staff shortages:

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/operations-cancelled-over-staff-shortage-2qtbvv8lw>

Scottish prisons admit they don't test for legal highs

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Scottish jails haven't introduced equipment to test prisoners suspected of taking legal highs, even though technology is being rolled out across other parts of the UK.

In England, hundreds of sniffer dogs have been trained to detect new psychoactive substances along with testing in jails.

And in a white paper, the UK Government said testing was being carried out in "all prisons".

But in a parliamentary answer to the Scottish Conservatives, chief executive of the Scottish Prison Service Colin McConnell said no such progress had been made north of the border.

He said: "The SPS does not test for New Psychoactive Substances. There are significant challenges around the detection and identification of NPS compounds and the availability of up-to-date testing kits due to the variants of such substances constantly changing."

He added the organisation had "adopted a therapeutic approach" to the issue.

So-called legal highs are becoming increasingly prevalent across the country, with deaths and hospital admissions increasing each year.

It also emerged earlier this month that the number of prisoners caught with illegal substances had hit a seven-year high.

Shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross, who asked the Parliamentary Question, said the chances of inmates being properly rehabilitated would be hampered unless the number of new psychoactive substances finding their way into prison was dealt with.

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross said:

"New psychoactive substances are a major problem in prison, and society as a whole.

"It's therefore quite remarkable to learn there is no testing in place for these in Scottish prisons.

"This is despite the fact jails south of the border are moving ahead with this.

"People expect prisons to be absolutely secure, and are understandably angry that so many illegal items – as well as legal high substances – find their way in with such ease.

"The Scottish Government should be following England's lead and making sure we can force these dangerous substances out of prisons altogether."

Below is the parliamentary response from the Scottish Government:

24 January 2017 (Holding Reply Issued 24 January 2017)

Index Heading: Learning and Justice

Douglas Ross (Highlands and Islands) (Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party): To ask the Scottish Government which new psychoactive substances the Scottish Prison Service tests for when prisoners are subject to a drugs test. S5W-05991

Michael Matheson:

I have asked Colin McConnell, Chief Executive of the Scottish Prison Service, to respond. His response is as follows:

The Scottish Prison Service (SPS) does not test for New Psychoactive Substances (NPS). There are significant challenges around the detection and identification of NPS compounds and the availability of up-to-date testing kits due to the variants of such substances constantly changing. SPS has adopted a therapeutic approach, alongside professional case management and the utilisation of existing drug testing powers to manage this evolving issue.

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However, only yesterday, UK justice secretary Elizabeth Truss said in answer to a question at Westminster:

"My hon. Friend is absolutely right that psychoactive substances have had a serious effect in our prisons: the prisons and probation ombudsman described them as a "game changer", which is why we have now rolled out testing to deal with those substances. We have extra sniffer dogs to deal with them as well, and we are making progress."

Source:

<https://hansard.parliament.uk/commons/2017-01-24/debates/EB38F55E-717E-46D3-A0F4-B0D9B484F234/OralAnswersToQuestions>

And in a UK Government White Paper published in November on prison safety and reform, it was confirmed that hundreds of drug detection dogs had been trained to sniff-out legal highs, adding: "In September, following a successful pilot in 34 prisons over the summer, we introduced nationwide mandatory testing for specified psychoactive substances in all prisons."

Source:

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/565014/cm-9350-prison-safety-and-reform-_web_.pdf

The Scottish Conservatives revealed the number of prisoners caught with illegal substances hit a seven-year high in 2016:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2017/01/drug-use-in-jail-hits-7-year-high/>

[Scottish exports to UK four times higher than to rest of EU](#)

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25 Jan 2017



Official Scottish Government figures have today revealed that Scotland's trade to the UK is four times the sum exported to the European internal market.

The figures show that, in 2015, Scotland's trade with England, Wales and Northern Ireland amounted to £49.8 billion. This compared to £12.3 billion for the EU internal market.

The figures show that the USA is Scotland's top international trading partner, with £4.6 billion exports.

Responding to the figures, Scottish Conservative Finance spokesman Murdo Fraser said:

"Once again, the facts are making it clear that our own Union of nations is Scotland's essential union on which our prosperity depends.

"Europe is a vital market place for us too – which is why we want to see a comprehensive free trade deal with the EU following Brexit.

"But these figures show that to prioritise the EU market before our own Union – as the SNP wants – is absurd.

"Quite simply, thousands of jobs depend on our ability to trade within the UK without any barriers in our way.

"These are the Scottish Government's own figures – which makes it all the

more astonishing that the SNP is determined to ignore them by continuing its ideological pursuit of separation.

“The Nationalists would put jobs and trade at risk simply because they don’t like the United Kingdom.

“We have had it confirmed again: the UK is four times as important to Scotland as the EU in trade, and the SNP must recognise this immediately by ditching its unwanted and divisive plan for a second referendum on independence.”

The figures are available here:

<http://news.gov.scot/news/scotlands-exports-increase>

[Student numbers plummet under SNP](#)

24 Jan 2017



Figures out today have revealed that there are 150,000 fewer students in further education in Scotland since the SNP came to power.

The Scottish Funding Council revealed that there were 227,258 college students in 2015/16, compared to 379,223 in 2007.

Part time courses have almost halved from 398,606 to 185,133 between 2007 and 2016, a decrease of 54 per cent.

The figures continue a trend that has seen college places slashed as a result of the SNP’s dramatic cuts to college funding in recent years.

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Liz Smith said:

“Colleges play a pivotal role in our education system, so it’s deeply concerning that student numbers have dropped to this level.

“Each year colleges help prepare thousands of people for the world of work by giving them the skills they need to get on in life, yet the SNP have chosen to implement huge cuts to the sector.

“Even places in part-time courses have dropped by over half, which will be a huge blow to those trying to balance work and study.

“The SNP’s record on education since they came to power is shameful, and they need to reverse their draconian cuts to college funding as soon as possible.

“Scotland’s colleges are among the best in Britain at equipping our youth with the necessary skills to succeed, and we have to support them.”

The report from the Scottish Funding Council is available here:

<http://www.sfc.ac.uk/communications/Statisticalpublications/2017/SFCST032017.aspx> The figures are in table B, figures 1, 4 & 11

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24 Jan 2017



Scotland’s justice secretary has been urged to sort out the Scottish Government’s reporting of crime figures, after they were branded ‘confusing and misleading’.

In a letter from Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross, Michael Matheson was told it was almost impossible to gauge violent crime because of the disparity in figures used.

The SNP has been criticised in recent weeks for boasting there were less than 7000 violent crimes in Scotland last year, even though data recorded by the police suggested there were close to ten times that.

It said there were 6775 instances of violence, but when incidents such as broken noses and cases where a victim loses consciousness are included, the toll rises to 68,482.

The disparity is caused by the distinction between ‘crimes’ and ‘offences’ in the recorded crime statistical bulletin, which ministers argue has been made since the 1920s.

But Mr Ross pointed out that the Scottish Crime and Justice Survey – which is also used to record violent crime – makes no such distinction.

And Derek Penman, HM Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland, said last week that figures combining violence with and without injury offer “a better overall measure of violent crime”.

Mr Ross argued that ministers should therefore create a clearer system of recording and publishing, adding it would increase the public's confidence in policing.

Earlier this month, the SNP was accused of "fiddling" crime figures after offences including punching, kicking and brandishing a weapon were left out of statistics.

Scottish Conservative shadow justice secretary Douglas Ross said: "The inconsistent use of 'violent crime' by the Scottish Government is at best confusing and at worst misleading.

"The SNP should consider implementing a joined-up, common sense and transparent approach on this issue so that the public can have full confidence in crime statistics.

"The current spin from the SNP does a disservice to tens of thousands of victims of violence and fails to provide an accurate overall picture of violent crime in Scotland."

A copy of the letter is below:

Dear Cabinet Secretary,

General Questions – Thursday 19th January 2017

I wish to follow up in writing on our exchange during General Questions on Thursday, 19th January, when I asked whether the Scottish Government is content with the way it records crime. You will be aware this is an issue the Scottish Conservatives have raised before, and which was reported in the national and local press earlier this month.

The Scottish Government statistical bulletin, 'Criminal Proceedings in Scotland, 2015-16', explicitly states that "violations of criminal law are divided, for *statistical purposes only*, into crimes and offences." Equally, the UK Statistics Authority, to which you referred in our exchange, emphasised in its July 2014 assessment report of the recorded crime statistics that the distinction between 'crimes' and 'offences' is "...made *only for working purposes*."

Nevertheless, the Scottish Government is issuing press releases, such as the release on 27th September 2016, which states that "non-sexual crimes of violence are at their second lowest level since 1974, despite a slight rise over the twelve months from 6,357 to 6,775." In this instance, and in others, the reference to violent crime fails to include weapons offences and common assaults – encompassing a broken nose and loss of consciousness, as well as domestic abuse – which would bring the total closer to 70,000 incidents across the country. This spin from the SNP does a disservice to tens of thousands of victims of violence and fails to provide an accurate overall picture of violent crime in Scotland for the public.

As a defence, and as you mentioned in your remarks last week, the SNP repeatedly argues that the distinction between 'crimes' and 'offences' has been made by consecutive administrations since the 1920s. Yet the Scottish Government's own website says that the recorded crimes bulletin in its current format has only been published since April 1998. Furthermore, you mentioned during our exchange that the Scottish Government records crime using the Scottish crime and justice survey (SCJS) and police recorded crime statistics.

However, and as you will be aware, the SCJS does not make the same distinction between 'crimes' and 'offences': *"...violent crime in the SCJS includes assault and robbery, crimes which are included in Group 1 (Nonsexual crimes of violence) and Group 6 (Miscellaneous offences) in police recorded crime figures."* (Scottish Government, Recorded Crime in Scotland 2015-16, p. 25)

The inconsistent use of 'violent crime' across the Scottish Government's statistical publications on recorded crime is at best confusing and at worst misleading. I am not alone in this view – it was reported last week that HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary in Scotland has questioned whether it is right that some 60,000 common assaults are not treated as "crimes of violence" in official publications. He further commented that the Crime Survey for England and Wales, which includes violence with and without injury, offers "a better overall measure of violent crime."

The SNP's argument in favour of "continuity for continuity's sake" does not serve the best interests of the public. Above all, the information should be targeted to the audience, even if the status quo better serves the SNP's spin machine. I strongly urge you to consider implementing a joined up, common sense and transparent approach on this issue so that the public can have full confidence in the Scottish Government's crime statistics.

I look forward to receiving your response to the points raised in this letter. Yours sincerely, Douglas Ross MSP

The SNP was accused of fiddling figures earlier this month:

<https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/news/404767/snp-accused-of-fiddling-crime-figures-as-the-shocking-extent-of-violent-incidents-in-scotland-is-revealed/>

The Scottish Government hailed what it said was statistics showing fewer than 7000 instances of violent crime last year:

<http://www.gov.scot/Resource/0050/00506122.pdf> (p1) and
<http://news.gov.scot/news/recorded-crime-at-a-42-year-low>

However, when a range of other violent incidents are included, such as handling offensive weapons, broken noses, loss of consciousness and other common assaults, the figure rises to 68,482. HM Inspector of Constabulary for Scotland Derek Penman said on [Twitter](#) on 19th January that the approach used by the Crime Survey for England and Wales *"includes violence with & without injury and is a better overall measure of violent crime"*.