

The SNP isn't listening to teachers or parents on education

John Swinney made a big speech on schools last week.

The SNP Education Secretary said the "data" told him that "the status quo was not an option", and then expressed his disappointment that "there is a strong body of opinion that does not accept the need for change and what is perhaps most worrying is that body of opinion is from within Scottish education." Most coverage described this as an attack on the "complacent educational establishment".

In doing so, commentators fell into a double trap. To oppose Mr Swinney's proposed changes to schools is not to oppose any change at all. The overwhelming response to his "Governance review" is that they are the wrong changes.

Secondly, this analysis accepts that the status quo is something John Swinney has stumbled upon. In fact, today's status quo in schools is the legacy of ten years of SNP government.

That status quo is declining budgets, 4,000 fewer teachers, 1,000 fewer support staff, a teacher recruitment crisis, and dysfunctional government bodies (Education Scotland and the Scottish Qualifications Authority). Yes, change is needed alright. Just not John Swinney's changes. For example, the SNP plans to centralise the setting of school budgets, and create unaccountable "regional boards" for a purpose which it cannot explain, except to say it wants to "strengthen the middle", whatever that means.

In Dunbar, in my constituency, the local primary has over 1,000 pupils, while a few miles away, Stenton school has 19. The idea that a civil servant with a formula knows enough about such diverse schools and the communities they serve to get their budget right is simply laughable. That decision has to be taken locally. What is more, if a head teacher or parent council think the budget is wrong, they can argue their case locally, and they do. Good luck trying that with a faceless bureaucrat in the Scottish Government's offices in Victoria Quay.

When Kezia Dugdale raised this at First Minister's Questions, Nicola Sturgeon was outraged. After all she is devolving £120m of Pupil Equity funding direct to schools. That is true. But the core budget for schools is over £4 billion. Only in the world of the SNP could centralising £4bn and devolving £120m be presented as "all power to the head teachers".

This is not the only “through the looking glass” aspect of the position into which John Swinney has manoeuvred himself. He described his Governance review as “...a vision of empowerment and devolution.” It is full of declarations about teachers and parents “knowing best”.

Mr Swinney’s problem is that the responses to his review from head teachers, teachers, parents and communities almost all reject his reforms, and tell him that what is needed is more resource, along with reform of Education Scotland and the SQA. John Swinney’s speech was clear – he intends to ignore them. They will be empowered, against their better judgement if need be. The Education Secretary is telling head teachers, teachers, and parents that they do not know best – he does.

We should not be surprised. When the Scottish Parliament’s education committee gathered evidence from hundreds of teachers that they had lost any faith in Education Scotland and the SQA, Mr Swinney simply rubbished the committee’s work as statistically invalid. Instead, he said, he would base his views on the teachers he spoke to when he visited schools. Happily, this “balanced sample” seemed very happy with everything he is doing. It is presumably only “bad” teachers and parents who have responded to his governance review with malice aforethought, and he intends to ignore them.

John Swinney loves to talk about how much he respects teachers. As well he might. They are the only thing keeping our schools going through the SNP’s ten years of incompetence and budget cutting. If he won’t listen to them his respect is just empty talk.

The status quo for teachers in Scotland is ten years of under-resourced curricular reform, lower salaries than colleagues in other countries, less preparation time, and the largest classes anywhere in the developed world. Nothing John Swinney is currently proposing will change that status quo, fashioned by him himself over his eight years as finance secretary.

All of this was laid bare in a recent parliamentary debate, where Holyrood defeated the government and passed a motion roundly condemning their handling of education. Last week’s speech tells us that John Swinney is not just ignoring parents and teachers, but parliament too.

That will of parliament, so sacred when it comes to an independence referendum, would seem of no import with regard to our children’s future.

—

Iain Gray is Scottish Labour's Education spokesperson. This article originally appeared in the Herald on March 29th 2017

Together we're stronger

28 March 2017

The SNP and the Greens have forced through the Scottish Parliament a vote calling for yet another divisive referendum.

Every Scottish Labour MSP voted against the plan. Scotland is divided enough – we do not need to be divided further. If you agree then sign our pledge at www.togetherstronger.scot and send a message to the Nationalists that they should focus on the job of governing instead of trying to divide us.

Commenting following tonight's vote in the Scottish Parliament, Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale said:

"Scotland doesn't need or want a second independence referendum.

"There is absolutely no evidence that another divisive referendum is the will of the people of Scotland.

"We need the SNP government to get on with the job of governing. That means focusing on jobs, growing the economy and helping family incomes.

"Holding another referendum on leaving the UK is the wrong thing to do for Scotland's economy, especially when there is so much economic uncertainty from the Tories' reckless plans for a hard Brexit.

"There absolutely should not be another independence referendum until after Brexit. We have no idea what Brexit looks like, or how it will impact our economy and families in Scotland.

"If there is to be another vote, the people of Scotland deserve clarity on what they are being asked to vote on.

"This process cannot be a stitch-up between Nicola Sturgeon and Theresa May.

"Both governments must make it an immediate priority to focus on the Brexit negotiations and securing the best possible deal for Scotland and the UK.

"If, after Brexit, the people of Scotland want a referendum on leaving the UK then it isn't the job of the UK government to stand in the way of that.

"The Labour Party I lead will never support independence. We believe that together we're stronger."

THE WILL OF THE SCOTTISH PEOPLE SHOULD BE RESPECTED

28 March 2017

THE WILL OF THE SCOTTISH PEOPLE SHOULD BE RESPECTED – DUGDALE

The SNP should respect the will of the Scottish people by scrapping its plan for another divisive referendum, Kezia Dugdale said today.

Speaking in the latest Scottish Parliament debate on independence, the Scottish Labour leader said that Scotland is already divided enough.

If you believe that Scotland should remain part of the UK, sign up to our website www.togetherstronger.scot and add your support.

Here is the full text of Kezia Dugdale's speech in the Scottish Parliament:

Last week we came together to remember those who lost their lives or were injured in the Westminster terror attack.

We united in our condemnation of a barbaric act, and reaffirmed our commitment to the values of tolerance and integration, freedom and solidarity.

It was right that last week's debate about a second independence referendum was postponed.

But the business of the Scottish Parliament has now resumed.

And here I am once again responding to remarks from the First Minister about a second independence referendum.

If it feels familiar to those of us in here just imagine how familiar it must feel to those outside of this chamber.

To people who very rarely tune in to these discussions.

Who just want political leaders to focus on the business of government by delivering good schools and hospitals, and on growing the economy to provide jobs and prosperity.

But once again they see us debating the issue they thought had been decided in a once-in-a-generation vote in 2014.

Yesterday's meeting between the Prime Minister and the First Minister summed up where we are in this country.

Two intransigent leaders focussed only on the constitution, while the business of government gets pushed to one side.

Nicola Sturgeon demonstrated that she has given up any pretence that she wants the best Brexit deal for Scotland.

Instead of fighting for more powers to come to Scotland from Brussels, it's independence or nothing for the First Minister.

And we had the spectacle of Theresa May claiming to be the best protector of the Union.

Just ponder that for a moment...

The leader of a Conservative Party that has caused so much division in our society.

That set Scotland against England in the General Election.

And whose reckless Brexit gamble brought us to this point, where leaving the EU just provides the SNP with the latest excuse it was looking for to push for another referendum.

So some humility from the Tories, and a genuine desire to probably engage with this place wouldn't go amiss.

Presiding Officer, in the week since we last met to discuss, at least three issues which would normally dominate the front pages of our newspapers have been buried in the back of the book.

We have learned that the SNP has abandoned a promise to reduce the working hours of junior doctors. A promise made by the former First Minister to the parents of a woman who lost her life.

We have seen a damning report into the quality and provision of child and adolescent mental health services.

And just today, it has been confirmed that Scotland's cancer waiting times have not been met for four years.

Each of these 3 issues constitutes an individual scandal.

Together they represent a complete abdication of responsibility.

But we aren't discussing any of those things. After all, why would the government responsible for the NHS want to debate its 10 year record on the health service?

Not when there is yet another independence debate to be had.

We all know the outcome of the vote tonight.

The compliant Greens will once again back their fellow Nationalists in the SNP.

Let's not pretend that this SNP-Green push for another divisive referendum reflects the will of the Scottish people.

Because It doesn't.

85 per cent of the population voted in the last referendum, and we voted decisively to remain in the UK.

That's the will of the people and it should be respected.

My message to the First Minister remains unchanged: we are divided enough – do not divide us again.

Because leaving the UK would mean £15 billion worth of extra cuts to schools and hospitals in Scotland.

And every time I am in a tv studio with a member of the governing party, as I was this morning, they seek to try and rubbish or ridicule these figures – but they simply can't deny that these are the government's own numbers.

The government's own stats say Independence would be catastrophic for working families.

That's why I could never support a policy that would hurt our poorest communities, so the question beckons, why would the First Minister?

We are just hours away from the start of the formal process of leaving the European Union.

The First Minister and I agree that Brexit risks damaging our relationship with Europe.

It will threaten thousands of jobs right here in Scotland and hold back our economy.

But like her I, accept that Brexit is going to happen. Scotland is leaving the European Union.

The First Minister has finally dropped the pretence that we could remain in the EU and that clarity is welcome.

The First Minister has another decision to make now too.

Is she going to spend the next 2yrs and 100% of her time campaigning for Scotland to leave the UK, at the expense of governing... or will she roll up her sleeves from today and seek to secure more powers for this Parliament when they return from Brussels to Britain?

Because tomorrow I will be in Cardiff doing just that.

Working with the Labour First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, who is prepared to put in the hard work necessary now to secure the best Brexit deal for Wales and for the United Kingdom.

Because this isn't a battle between independence and the status quo.

It's about the SNP's never ending campaign for separation and what the people

want – and voted for – a powerful Scottish Parliament within the United Kingdom.

These benches will campaign with everything we have for Scotland to remain in the UK.

A UK where political and economic power is in the hands of the many, not the few.

A UK that delivers for the people of Scotland.

That was our manifesto commitment and we will honour that tonight by voting against the SNP's plan for another divisive referendum.

[Let's End Period Poverty](#)

Scottish Labour has stepped up its campaign to tackle period poverty with the launch of a new website.

Following a round-table meeting with experts and campaigners, Labour MSP Monica Lennon has set up a new website encouraging people to get involved in the fight to help women and girls who cannot currently access or afford sanitary products. The website can be accessed at www.periodpoverty.scot and provides advice for those looking to support the campaign.

Monica Lennon has already announced plans to launch a Member's Bill in the coming months to tackle period poverty, which could help thousands of women in Scotland.

The Labour MSP hosted a discussion with key campaigners yesterday, including representatives from the office of the Children and Young People's Commissioner, the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists, the EIS, the Glasgow Simon Community and others.

Labour's inequalities spokeswoman Monica Lennon said:

"Poverty, health conditions and a lack of access to sanitary products all make managing menstruation difficult."

"In many homes, schools and workplaces embarrassment and stigma around periods is a barrier to hygiene and health care. We need to tackle the scandal of period poverty by first talking about the problem and then taking action to eradicate it. By launching a new website I hope to encourage people to get involved in this campaign."

"The generosity of Scots is helping food banks and shelters to distribute sanitary products but it should never come to this. My Bill will seek to change the law and make period poverty and stigma a thing of the past."

Kezia Dugdale outlines best Brexit deal for Scotland

MONDAY 27 MARCH 2017

Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale has written to Prime Minister Theresa May to outline the best Brexit deal for Scotland ahead of Article 50 being triggered.

The best Brexit deal for Scotland, as outlined by Ms Dugdale, includes:

- *Access to the single market.*
- *Retaining the benefits of freedom of movement.*
- *Guaranteed rights for EU nationals currently resident in the UK.*
- *Access to EU research funds.*
- *Access to the Erasmus programme*

The full letter is as follows:

Dear Theresa,

On Wednesday you will trigger Article 50 by giving formal notification of the UK's intention to withdraw from the European Union. This will initiate a two-year negotiation process, which will both decide the terms on which the UK leaves the EU, and set out the broad parameters for our post-Brexit relationship with the remaining 27 member states. I did not vote for Brexit, and nor did Scotland as a whole. However, I am committed to making the best of it, and that means securing a deal that safeguards Scotland's economy and labour market, and retains, as far as possible, all that is best about our relationship with the EU.

I believe a deal can be negotiated – on differential terms if necessary – which ensures that the interests of people across the UK are well-represented. In the rest of this letter, I will set out the key areas that must form a part of your negotiating stance if Scotland's interests are to be taken into account, as you have promised they will be. It is vital that your government works closely with the devolved administrations in the months ahead, and all constitutional focus must be on securing the best Brexit deal for the UK. The First Minister of Wales, Carwyn Jones, has committed to working tirelessly in the pursuit of the best deal for the people of Wales. It is disappointing that the First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, is ready to disengage from the process. As leader of Scottish Labour, I will always stand up for the people of Scotland and I believe on that basis we should engage directly on these matters.

Access to the single market and freedom of movement

I am extremely concerned that your present negotiating stance – and in particular your prioritisation of immigration controls over access to the single market – risks an unnecessarily hard Brexit that would damage the economies of the UK and Scotland. Although it is widely predicted that Brexit will have a negative impact on Scotland's economy, the extent of the damage inflicted is very much dependent on the approach that your government takes to the negotiations.

Independent estimates suggest that the impact of Scotland losing access to the single market and reverting to WTO status would be that Scottish GDP would be five per cent lower (equivalent to £8 billion in 2015-16 prices) over the next ten years than would otherwise have been the case, real wages would be reduced by seven per cent (equivalent to around £2,000 per year), and overall employment would fall by three per cent (equivalent to around 80,000 jobs).

Such an outcome is unconscionable and must be avoided. If the interests of Scotland are to be taken into account, you will pursue a deal for Scotland which allows Scottish businesses to maintain unfettered access to the single market, and EU and Scottish workers to retain the benefits of freedom of movement.

The benefits to Scotland of unfettered access to the single market are widely accepted. It generates over £12 billion a year for Scotland's economy and is vital to Scotland's manufacturing and services sectors. Meanwhile, and as the Fraser of Allander Institute has recently noted, Scotland's working age population is already projected to decline over the next few decades. Any post-Brexit deal that limits the number of people coming to Scotland could have significant consequences for Scotland's economy and public services.

A deal that serves Scotland's best interests would, therefore, retain tariff and non-tariff barrier free access to the single market for Scottish exporters, and allow Scottish firms to continue to recruit workers from elsewhere in the EU, and Scottish workers to continue living and working elsewhere in the EU.

As I have made clear in recent months, Scottish Labour believes that a more federal UK will help to fix the failures of politics that led many people to vote for Brexit in the first place. Negotiating a distinct Brexit deal for Scotland – and indeed other UK regions – would be a signal of intent on your part, symbolic of your willingness to explore alternative constitutional structures that increase democratic accountability and place the UK on a surer footing.

Guaranteed rights for EU nationals currently resident in the UK

An issue that demands immediate attention is the status of non-UK EU nationals currently living in the UK, and Scotland. There are over 180,000 non-UK EU nationals living, working, and studying in Scotland. They make an immense and invaluable contribution to Scotland's economy, culture and

society.

However, since the Brexit vote your government has ignored the calls of business, public sector employers, and universities, by refusing to guarantee the rights of European nationals living and working in the UK. Instead, you have chosen to use them as bargaining chips. I would urge you to put an end to this and make guaranteeing the future status of EU nationals living in the UK – and UK nationals living elsewhere in the EU – an absolute priority in the early stages of the Article 50 negotiations.

Scotland's higher education sector

Every effort must be made to ensure that Brexit does not damage the international standing of Scotland's universities, or detract from the quality of teaching they provide, the research they produce, and the opportunities they afford our young people. This requires action in three areas: research funding; freedom of movement; and the Erasmus programme.

1) Research funding

Scottish universities have benefited enormously from EU research funding, securing 11.4 per cent of the total allocation to the UK as of July 2016. Maintaining this level of funding is integral to ensuring Scottish universities can continue to uphold their international reputations as centres of academic excellence.

Regrettably, it is currently very unclear how, and to what extent, Brexit will affect the ability of Scottish universities to secure EU funding. We don't know whether Scottish universities will be able to continue accessing EU research programmes such as Horizon 2020, and ministers have repeatedly declined to give assurances that the government will maintain current levels of funding post-Brexit if access to EU programmes is impaired or lost altogether.

Ensuring that Scottish universities can continue to access EU research funds after Brexit should be a key plank of your negotiating platform. Concurrently, the UK government should provide assurances that, whatever the outcome of negotiations, current levels of research funding will be maintained post-Brexit.

2) Freedom of movement

Freedom of movement is of great importance to the higher education sector. In 2014-15, 11.1 per cent of staff in Scottish Higher Education institutions were EU nationals. Among academic staff, the figure was 14.8 per cent. High quality research depends in large part on international collaboration, which is facilitated by the free movement of people across the EU. Any perception that EU nationals are no longer welcome in the UK could impede the ability of Scotland's higher education institutions to attract the most gifted staff and students. This would have pronounced and unwelcome consequences: it could damage the international reputation of Scottish universities and lead to a reduction in standards of teaching and research. It is vital that any such

perception is avoided, so that Scottish universities can continue to attract the brightest and best staff and students, both now and in the future.

3) Erasmus

Since 2008, over 10,000 young Scots have studied or worked in another European country, courtesy of the Erasmus programme. The benefits of Erasmus are well established: it broadens participants' educational, cultural and social horizons and equips them with the transferable skills they need to be successful in a globalised marketplace. Consequently, any limit imposed on Scottish participation in Erasmus is tantamount to a limit imposed on the aspirations of our young people. This we cannot afford, and will not accept. I would urge you to do everything in your power to ensure that Scottish students and young people can continue to access Erasmus following the UK's exit from the EU

Conclusion

As the Prime Minister, you are negotiating on behalf of people throughout the whole of the UK, something I trust will be at the forefront of your mind throughout the Brexit negotiations. As I stated at the start of this letter, I want to secure a positive and progressive outcome from the Brexit negotiations; one that limits the damage of leaving the EU, maximises the opportunities, and lays firm foundations for the future of this country, whose best interests we each seek to achieve. That means negotiating to secure the best possible deal for Scotland: one that allows us to retain what is best about our relationship with the EU while remaining an integral part of the UK.

Yours sincerely

Kezia Dugdale
Leader of the Scottish Labour Party