

The unionist response to the SNP's push for indyref2

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In just three months' time, people across Scotland will vote in the Scottish Parliament Election.

It will seem incredible that, with everything else that is going on right now, there will also be an election.

And though it will feel very different from previous votes, there will still be campaigning and rigorous debate.

The public will rightly ask why is this campaign, happening now, isn't this just an unnecessary distraction?

Why should I be thinking about politics, the future of my country, when I cannot see my family.

Or when my child cannot go to their school to get an education and the online learning tools are not working.

Or when my business has been shut again for over a month with no guarantee of when it will be able to reopen.

Is this really, in the midst of all that's happening, the right time for politics?

The more optimistic of you will say that we could be in a very different place in three months.

That's true. However, it would be bordering on naïve to say that we will be back to normal life by then.

As we approached the end of a horrendous 2020, it seemed as though 2021 could be a fresh start.

However, if anything it has felt more like a reversal towards the spring of last year than a move forward.

We are living under a national lockdown again.

A lockdown that affects every aspect of our lives and the lives of every single person in our country.

Our streets and roads are eerily empty.

The normal routines of our days halted.

We are still in the middle of a global pandemic.

Our economy has been plunged into the worst recession since records began.

And our recovery is not secure, the latest data, for November, before the second national lockdown, shows Scotland's GDP shrinking by 1.4%.

With the Scottish Fiscal Commission predicting on Thursday that our economy will not return to its pre-Covid size until 2024.

Most shocking and saddening of all, over 100,000 people across the UK, including 8,000 Scots have lost their lives because of this awful virus.

That is not a statistic, every single one of those deaths is a tragedy.

A parent, partner, sibling, child or friend.

And I want to express my sincere condolences and sympathies to every family grieving the loss of a loved one.

Each and every death is a terrible and painful reminder of the danger of this virus and the threat it still poses.

A reminder for all of us to continue to follow the public health guidance to protect ourselves and others.

In the face of these nearly overwhelming challenges, the public expect our politicians to focus on the crisis facing our country.

This pandemic has consumed every aspect of their lives and therefore the same should be true for our politics.

Why should politicians have the luxury of pursuing their own interests when the rules they set for the public have effectively paused the lives of everyone in the country.

For the most part that has been the case, we have had nearly a year without normal politics.

Yes, there have still been plenty of disagreement and debate.

From my own party, the Scottish Conservatives have challenged the Scottish Government repeatedly over the speed at which they are rolling out vaccines, given that this protection is our only way out of lockdown.

We demanded they publish daily Covid vaccination figures, and won. These numbers make it clear where the Scottish Government have to ramp up their efforts as they continue to lag behind, despite the supplies available to them.

We also forced them to provide £20 million to restore their cuts to drug rehab beds.

And we've fought them over their business grants scheme, which is not paying

out support quick enough and allowing too many businesses to fall through the gaps in eligibility for payments.

We already got a u-turn on grants to taxi drivers. And we're pushing for another u-turn on payments to small B&Bs.

And on children's education, despite repeated promises, online learning remains a postcode lottery with many parents unable to access equipment and guidance.

But those are challenges of process rather than of politics.

They are intended to be received in the constructive manner in which they are given.

We do not have different goals, we both want to protect lives and livelihoods at this time.

We just have different ideas on how best to achieve those goals.

No one party, especially in this pandemic, has a monopoly on wisdom.

We all have a role in supporting the Scottish people through this.

And that means, in the eyes of the public, we should be leaving normal politics to the side and focusing entirely on the pandemic.

It is our duty to come together and focus on the national interest in a time of crisis.

That is what the public expect.

So, you can imagine the sheer outrage that many felt – myself included – when just over a week ago the SNP launched their 11-point plan to deliver another independence referendum.

Only days before that announcement, Nicola Sturgeon warned us of the “seriousness of the situation we continue to face”.

And our infection rates, hospital capacity and weekly deaths are close to the highest they have ever been.

In what world is this the right time to be talking about independence and another referendum.

Like me, Nicola Sturgeon was there in 2014, and while the SNP like to pretend it was a happy celebration of democracy, she knows how divisive in reality that referendum was and still is.

The bruising and hurt it caused, how it split our country, turned families and friends against one and other, undermined trust in our governments.

You only need to spend a minute on social media looking at posts about Scottish politics to know how deeply entrenched those views still are.

Publishing that plan was another attempt to break open those deep scars in our nation.

For every hardened nationalist celebrating a roadmap for ending the UK, there was a unionist crying out that the SNP were again undermining democracy.

And many, many more people in between, baffled at the timing of the announcement, during the worst days of the pandemic.

Then there was the substance of the plan itself.

Proposing that the SNP would hold a referendum, if they win a majority in May, regardless of whether it was legal or not.

Setting the Scottish Government up for a Catalan-style constitutional clash with the UK Government.

A plan aimed at appeasing the rank and file SNP membership.

Going against what Nicola Sturgeon says is the “gold standard” for a referendum and promoting an outcome that she had personally ruled out for years.

I’ve been clear, the Scottish Conservatives would take no part in an unsanctioned vote, a wildcat referendum, unworthy of one of the oldest democracies in the world.

Yet even more important is the tone that this announcement set.

Not only was this the announcement of a plan for another divisive independence referendum,

the content, in putting forward an illegal referendum, was as abrasive as it possibly could be.

It has brought politics – and that same old divisive constitutional debate – back to the fore.

The most important tool that we have in our fight against coronavirus is public trust.

The public need to be united in being behind government guidance, in following the rules.

Tone and communication are as important as PPE and testing in tackling this pandemic.

Compliance is built on trust.

Yet an announcement like this undermines trust, it makes people question motives.

How can the Scottish Government credibly argue that this announcement is above party politics and in the interests of all of Scotland?

It suggests a wholesale return to the partisan and if that is the lens through which they choose to frame some of their actions, then there is a danger that some people may view all their announcements in that way.

Nicola Sturgeon is back to being the SNP leader. She's no longer the First Minister from the start of this pandemic.

The public will rightly be asking why the SNP should be able to pursue their political priorities and yet they cannot leave their home?

We saw their hypocrisy last week, when they made that same complaint as the Prime Minister was here to thank those who were helping with testing or vaccinating Scots, all the while they've begun their campaign for indyref2 again.

The public expects a government that puts itself above party politics at this time.

Now I'm sure there are those who will try to claim that the Scottish Government and the SNP are separate entities, that this was not a government announcement.

But the SNP are the party of government, the First Minister and the SNP leader are not different people.

And that is before we get into their commitment to publish a referendum bill ahead of the election. Wasting vital government time and resources.

There is no getting away from it, the announcement of this plan for another divisive referendum at this point in the pandemic was reckless and irresponsible.

Needlessly damaging trust in the Scottish Government when it is needed most.

With this announcement, Sturgeon is putting her party before the pandemic.

Now I don't expect Nicola Sturgeon to give up on her support for independence and another referendum, any more than she could expect me to give up fighting for Scotland's place in the UK and opposing any independence referendum, at any time, every step of the way.

But there is a question of our priorities here.

About what we see as the right thing for Scotland right now.

My priorities, I believe, would make sense to most people.

To manage this pandemic, roll out the vaccine as quickly as possible so that we can ease restrictions and focus 100% on our economic recovery.

To rebuild our country, starting right now, with the investment and infrastructure we need to create good jobs, opportunity and growth.

To deliver certainty and stability after so many years of uncertainty in

Scotland.

Those are my priorities for the months and years ahead.

It is overwhelming in the national interest now to get Scotland back on track.

And this is going to require our whole country, all of our parties and both the Scottish and UK Governments working together, to achieve it.

Yet the SNP's priority is another independence referendum, which they say should happen as early as possible, even this year.

Their response to this horrendous pandemic is to create more uncertainty and division.

And if they go down the route of an illegal referendum and constitutional gridlock, they will create disorder and chaos.

I never want that future for Scotland.

And I do not understand how anyone, even the most devout nationalist, can credibly say that it is what we need now.

The SNP claim that we need a referendum to rebuild, but how will a referendum help our economy and create jobs.

How do you say to the young adult leaving school, college or university and struggling to find work that a referendum is what they need?

Or to the shop owner trying to get their business back on track and people on to our high streets that a referendum is what they need?

Or to the worker facing redundancy that a referendum is what they need?

A referendum that would hold our economic recovery back, make companies reconsider their investments and employers pause their hiring and training plans.

I am not speaking hypothetically, we know this, we saw it before in the 2014 referendum.

So instead of dividing our country all over again, Nicola Sturgeon should be doing the right thing and putting her job as First Minister ahead of being SNP leader.

She should be uniting our country around a national mission of tackling this virus and rebuilding Scotland, instead of pursuing political priorities.

She should disown this plan, which will only lead to an illegal referendum, and commit to putting our recovery first.

She should put the needs of the Scottish people ahead of the obsession of SNP members.

I started this speech with the timing of the Scottish Parliament Election.

In doing so I posed the question: is this the right time for politics?

I don't think it is. But in the face of increasingly stronger threats of indyref2 from the SNP, I don't have the luxury, or the choice, to completely put politics aside.

We are going to need to have a Covid-election.

And my party will fight that election as hard as we have ever done.

We will match the SNP's renewed threat of indyref2 this year, with a renewed push to stop them in their tracks, just as we did in 2016 and every year since.

Which is why I am challenging Nicola Surgeon to a debate this month on Scotland's future.

If she believes that this referendum plan is an essential part of Scotland's economic recovery from coronavirus, then the First Minister should explain it to the Scottish people.

The SNP are not holding back. They've taken the gloves off and they're going full-throttle for indyref2 right now.

So let's not wait for the election.

Nicola Sturgeon, SNP leader, let's you and I debate our respective positions right now.

If she thinks that now is the time to talk about a referendum, then there should be scrutiny of her plan.

If she wants to return to party politics, then this is how political leaders put their ideas across, not in government press conferences.

I won't allow this plan, to wreck our recovery to go unchallenged and my side of the argument unheard.

So, if she is not prepared to disown this plan, then she should be prepared to defend it.

Because we all have a choice over whether we put another independence referendum ahead of our recovery.

Over whether Scotland will have a divisive Covid-referendum.

It is not inevitable. It does not need to happen. It is our decision.

Constitutional politics can be put on the backburner.

If Nicola Sturgeon does not take the threat off the table, then we can be the block to the SNP in the election and in doing so stop a Covid-referendum.

Ultimately the decision over whether we choose recovery over a referendum belongs to us, it does not belong to the SNP.

And that is the message that the Scottish Conservatives will be taking to the country in this Covid-election.

This is the time to come together in the national interest and focus 100% on rebuilding Scotland from coronavirus.

We will need to have an election this year, we do not need to have a divisive referendum.

Let's choose rebuilding and recovery over a Covid-referendum.