

Tories and SNP need to listen on the budget



By Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale MSP

Tomorrow, Tory Chancellor Philip Hammond will continue to pursue his failed austerity agenda.

Time and again, the Tories have been shown up for failing to grow our economy.

Real wages are down, while the cost of living is up. Hard-working families are being squeezed, while the Tories refuse to ask the richest in society to pay their fair share.

It is society's most vulnerable that are paying the price of Tory failures. And Theresa May's pursuit of a hard Brexit will only make the situation worse.

Mr Hammond will continue to try to balance the books at the expense of the worst-off, while his boss simultaneously wrecks our economy by pulling us out of the single market.

It doesn't have to be this way.

The last Labour government presided over the longest period of sustained economic growth since the Second World War. We delivered tax credits and the minimum wage, to name just a few policies designed to help – not punish – hard-working families.

That is the kind of agenda Philip Hammond should be pursuing – and I have written to him setting out Labour's demands.

With austerity having failed and Brexit a profound threat to the Scottish and UK economies, a change of course is not just necessary – it is vital.

I want to the Tories to:

- Reverse planned welfare cuts.
- Do more support for our North Sea oil and gas industry.
- Take action to end the anomaly by which the police and fire services in Scotland are required to pay VAT, at a cost of around £35 million a year.

Policies that disproportionately affect women and lead to increases in child poverty are fundamentally unacceptable. That's why he should reverse planned social security cuts.

But here in Scotland, we also have the powers to take a different path. Our Scottish Parliament has the ability to make the richest pay their fair share. But we know that Nicola Sturgeon – the anti-austerity champion of the 2015 General Election – has been found out.

Where she could tax the richest, she has chosen to cut £170million out of local services. Where she could invest in education, she instead argues for a tax-cut for first-class air passengers. Where she could focus on building a fairer, more progressive society, she instead obsesses over breaking up the UK.

The SNP has turned the Scottish Parliament into a conveyor belt for Tory austerity, with a government whose only aim is to drive a wedge between us and our nearest neighbours.

I will always fight austerity economics and nationalist politics – be that from the Tories or the SNP. I will always stand-up for hard-working families, because that's what Labour politicians do.

It was pressure from Scottish Labour that finally forced the SNP into action over the bedroom tax. Thousands of people are better off in Scotland today because we never gave up the fight, despite nationalist reluctance.

Just last week, I put forward our plan to use the new powers of the Scottish Parliament to top-up child benefit – a move that could take 30,000 children out of poverty.

These are the kind of policies Labour will fight for.

I hope Philip Hammond and Nicola Sturgeon sit-up, take notice and realise there is a better way.

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