

Teaching fund a step in right direction, but more needed

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14 Feb 2017



The announcement of a new teacher-training fund is a step in the right direction, the Scottish Conservatives have said, but more needs to be done.

The Scottish Government's investment for new teachers has been welcomed by shadow education secretary Liz Smith, but she warned it would not make up for a decade of educational neglect.

Just one of the many issues local authorities have faced under SNP leadership is the recruitment process for schools and maintaining the services of specialist teachers.

Figures have shown that schools have struggled over the years to attract the necessary number of teachers, with some councils even being forced to offer financial incentives.

Scottish Conservative shadow education secretary Liz Smith said:

"This will be welcome news for Scotland's teaching profession which has had to bear the full brunt of the SNP's successive cuts to teacher numbers since 2007.

"It has been abundantly clear for some time that Scotland has too few professionally trained teachers particularly in some core subject areas and we know that several local authorities have found it impossible to fill key vacancies with the obvious costs to education in the classroom.

"The key test is not only the provision of more teacher training places but an improvement in the employment rates for newly qualified teachers.

"Scotland cannot afford to lose its talented pool of teacher trainees nor can it allow the SNP to fail again in its workforce planning."

For more on the story, visit:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-38969970>

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14 Feb 2017



The Scottish Conservatives have demanded finance secretary Derek Mackay addresses Holyrood over the country's business rates crisis.

Increasing numbers of organisations are protesting at the revaluation scheme, which has seen some pay more than double their current taxation.

Now the SNP has been urged to take action and explain what it intends to do to solve the problem.

Two newspapers are campaigning on behalf of businesses, many of whom say they face closure as a result of the hikes.

A formal request has gone into Scottish Parliament authorities from the Scottish Conservatives for Mr Mackay to give a statement when MSPs return next week.

When challenged on the issue previously, First Minister Nicola Sturgeon merely said there would be an opportunity to appeal for individual businesses.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

"This revaluation could see businesses across the country going under, it's as simple as that.

"If that's not cause for the SNP government to act, I don't know what is.

"While Nicola Sturgeon obsesses with Brexit and independence, Scottish companies large and small are staring down the barrel of a gun.

"This revaluation is threatening jobs and the wider economy, and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency."

Scottish Conservative shadow finance secretary Murdo Fraser said:

"This is fast becoming a crisis for businesses the length and breadth of the country.

“Many say they face closure, while others are being forced to hike their prices to cover these increased costs.

“This is not an acceptable state of affairs, and we need to know what Scotland’s finance secretary intends to do about this.

“It’s time for the SNP to prove it’s not an anti-business government and take some meaningful action to help these businesses which are the lifeblood of our economy.”

The Scottish Conservatives have raised the issue of business rates on a number of occasions since the revaluation:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2017/02/ruth-calls-for-immediate-review-of-revaluation-of-business-rates/>

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2016/09/leading-businesses-appeal-to-snp-over-unfair-rates-hike/>

The Herald launched a campaign today on the issue:

http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/15089947.Can_t_pay_won_t_pay_Licensed_trade_to_fight_new_Poll_Tax_following_closure_fears/

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- Ruth: A free-trading Britain can face down SNP plans for break-up

13 Feb 2017



An “outward-looking, free-trading” Britain can provide people across the UK with the security and opportunity they crave, Ruth Davidson will say in a keynote speech this evening.

Saying the country must reject the path of “economic nationalism”, she will set out a vision for a country that “pushes at our boundaries, instead of building walls”.

And while the SNP has sought to use the UK’s vote to leave the EU as reason to ramp up its campaign for another referendum, Ruth will say that – in contrast – it has made the case for Scottish independence “weaker and more

illogical than ever”.

Nonetheless, she will say the UK needs to face up to an SNP government which has watched the tactics of the Leave campaign, learned from them, and is now “itching to get its own campaign bus into gear”.

She will say that a key argument against independence will be on trade – pointing to how Scotland’s trade with the UK is worth four times that of exports to the EU.

Voting to leave the UK in response to Brexit would be akin to “stubbing your toe, to then amputate your foot”.

In tonight’s address, she will also say it’s vital politicians respect the result of referendums, and had Scotland voted for separation in 2014, she wouldn’t have denied it nor demanded a re-run.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

“The SNP is a formidable political operation which – I suspect – has learnt from the tactics of the Leave campaign last year and is itching to get its own campaign bus into gear as we speak.

“So my view is that the case for the Union must be made afresh, and we have to persuade people once again that our own Union of nations still works for us all.

“And there is something of a Brexit paradox here.

“Because while Brexit has provided the means for Nicola Sturgeon to crank up her independence campaign once more – it has also made that case weaker and more illogical than ever.

“As we learned only last month in official Scottish Government statistics, trade within the UK internal market is worth four times to Scotland than trade with the EU.

“The logic is therefore clear.

“If everyone in Scotland agrees that free trade with Europe is important – and we do – it is literally impossible to deny that trade with the rest of the UK matters four times as much.

“But rather than accept that logic, the same old nationalist contortions are applied.

“It is already cranking up the grievance machine in an attempt to push people towards the exit door.”

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12 Feb 2017



Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson has written to the First Minister calling on her to launch an urgent review into the revaluation of business rates.

It comes after Ruth was inundated with letters from businesses across Scotland who are facing huge increases in their rates, with some now having to pay four times more than they did previously.

A full scale reform plan for the business rates system is currently being prepared by former RBS executive, Ken Barclay.

However, firms and trade bodies are warning that the revaluation will come into force prior to that plan, and that an emergency review separate to that is therefore required.

One business owner complained that the hike in rates was “unsustainable for a small business and proves yet again how those in authority are divorced from reality.” Another said the rise in their business rates would inevitably lead “to the slow death of our business.”

It points to a growing crisis facing many small businesses, that if not addressed, could lead to closures and job losses.

In her letter Ruth also asked Nicola Sturgeon to heed the warning of the Scottish Tourism Alliance, who this week voiced their concerns about the increase in rates facing some businesses.

They too have called on the SNP to review the ‘disproportionate valuations being imposed’ on many businesses.

Scottish Conservative leader Ruth Davidson said:

“Over the past few days I have been inundated with letters from businesses who are worried and angry about the impending rise in their rates.

“Some of them are facing three or four fold increases which is the difference between them making a profit, and having to close down.

“These shops, hotels and restaurants are vital to our economy, providing much

needed jobs in many areas of the country, and we cannot afford to see them simply go out of business.

"That's why I've called on Nicola Sturgeon to listen to the voices of these businesses and the Scottish Tourism Alliance and launch an urgent review into these rate increases.

"The amounts that are being asked for are clearly unsustainable and if immediate action is not taken then we risk seeing a huge amount of damage done to our economy."

A pdf of the letter sent to the First Minister can be found here:
www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Letter-to-FM-business-rates.pdf

Below are some excerpts of the letters received by Ruth regarding the increase in business rates:

"I very much hope that you will be able to convince the powers-that-be to re-think these exorbitant rises. If they are imposed, I have no doubt that many people will be forced out of business which will lead to even greater redundancies, These rises must be reconsidered."

The Ship Inn, Stonehaven

"The new Rateable Value produced by the revaluation process is proposed as £27,200. This will take us above the threshold for the Small Business Bonus Scheme's Rural Relief giving us a Non Domestic Rates bill of £12,675.20 from 2017/18. A 338% increase on 2016/17. Without action many small, particularly rural, businesses face a difficult or bleak future. In turn many areas of Scotland, particularly rural areas, will face job losses and a contraction of the local economy."

Argyll Hotel, Cambeltown

"No one doubted a rates rise, but these rises are unsustainable and cannot be absorbed by our businesses or passed onto our customers. Most of us are owner-occupiers of small businesses who took the premises on because we could make a living from them. With such extreme rate rises this will no longer be the case. Re-investment in our businesses will be extremely difficult with knock-on effects on staff morale, customer satisfaction and ultimately turnover. Local job losses or closure is our only recourse. As business owners we all share a common optimism but on this occasion we all agree that the impending rate rises will result in a slow death for our businesses."

Reds Restaurant, Portobello

"After speaking to other business owners locally, I have found many similarly minded to me. We now reluctantly have to look at our options, and if financially things do not ease, we may have to close the business after the final three years of our lease and hand the hotel back to our landlord as we will be unable to make the required investment in the property to secure its future. At the point that we return the hotel to the landlord, I believe that

the hotel will close permanently which will result in the loss of 30 jobs locally, and this is down to the final nail which is the business rates increase...”

Stotfield Hotel, Lossiemouth

The letter from the Scottish Tourism Alliance to Nicola Sturgeon regarding business rates can be found [here](#).

Lack of SNP planning sees courts and police buildings lying dormant

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- Lack of SNP planning sees courts and police buildings lying dormant

11 Feb 2017



Around one in six Police Scotland buildings are not in daily use, while the Scottish Government is sitting on £1 million worth of empty courtrooms.

Information obtained by the Scottish Conservatives has revealed that, of 412 police properties across Scotland, 60 are “not currently in day-to-day use”.

And the research also revealed that sheriff courts which have shut, but not sold, total an estimated value of around £1.13 million.

The Scottish Conservatives have said it shows a lack of forward-planning by the SNP, which is prepared to oversee the closure of courts and police buildings without thinking about what to do with the buildings thereafter.

Police Scotland embarked on a programme of front counter closures in 2014, and outlined plans for even more to shut last year.

The Scottish Conservatives criticised that move, saying people still valued local police stations and they played an important role in cutting crime.

In its response to the party’s Freedom of Information request, Police Scotland said: “Out of 412 properties, 60 are not currently in day-to-day use. A number of those are still used occasionally and some are subject to ongoing engagement with stakeholders regarding future use.”

A number of court closures have also occurred on the SNP’s watch, with 17 sheriff and justice of the peace facilities closing since the decision was announced in 2013.

However, it has now emerged many of these buildings are still on the taxpayer's books, including Arbroath, valued at £240,000; Cupar, valued at £200,000; and Stonehaven, valued at £330,000.

The Scottish Conservatives also criticised the court closures programmes, warning it would make life harder for victims and witnesses, and add an additional burden to those courts remaining.

Scottish Conservative MSP Margaret Mitchell, convener of Holyrood's justice committee, said:

"We were critical of SNP plans to close police stations and court buildings from the outset.

"But what this shows is that those proposals went on regardless, without any thought as to what to do with the buildings.

"It means the public has far reduced access to justice, yet the taxpayer hasn't benefited as a result.

"In the face of the absolute refusal to change its mind on these closures, at the very least the money raised from their sale, now the Scottish Government has deemed them surplus to requirements, could go some way to improving justice in Scotland.

"It's yet another example of the SNP making sweeping decisions without even trying to think the whole process through."

To see a copy of the Freedom of Information response from the Scottish Courts Service, visit:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Scottish-Courts-FOI-response.pdf>

To see a copy of the Freedom of Information response from Police Scotland, visit:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Police-FOI-response.pdf>

The Scottish Government's programme of police station closures has been roundly criticised:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-37850332>

Similarly, the nationalists have been under fire for closing a fifth of Scotland's courts:

<http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2015/09/sheriff-courts-less-efficient-in-wake-of-snp-closure-programme/>