

Vote of no confidence in the First Minister defeated in The Scottish Parliament

The leader of the Scottish Conservatives at Holyrood, Ruth Davidson MSP made one of her last speeches in the parliament calling for the resignation of First Minister, Nicola Sturgeon.

Following an emotive afternoon – on the one year anniversary of the first national lockdown – parliament voted No 65, Yes 31 and 27 abstentions. So the motion was defeated and the First Minister survived the latest assault on her by opposition parties in the wake of the harassment complaints against former First Minister Alex Salmond and how the government dealt with the inquiry into that.

Ms Davidson's motion read: "That the Parliament has no confidence in the First Minister, in light of confirmation that the Scottish Government ignored legal advice on its prospects of success in Alex Salmond's judicial review case, and multiple credible witnesses indicating that the First Minister misled the Parliament."

Ms Davidson who represents Central Edinburgh, said at Holyrood: "Presiding Officer, We are here today because a former First Minister was accused of sexually harassing members of staff in the government he was there not only to lead, but to serve.

We are here because the hastily changed policy designed to protect staff from such actions – was not fit for purpose and was implemented in an unfair and unlawful way.

We are here because the Scottish Government, when subject to judicial review of the clusterbourach that had occurred, sought to frustrate the court, embarrassed their own lawyers and attempted to “defend the indefensible”, costing the taxpayer over half a million pounds in the process.

Nobody, nobody comes out of this well, apart from the original complainants and external counsel to the Scottish Government.

And nobody, nobody has taken responsibility for the multiple failings at every level which occurred.

Getting to today has been a process years in the making.

Let’s remember the promises that were made.

“I now intend – fully, as the First Minister – to respect the work of the various investigations that have been established”.

The words of Nicola Sturgeon – spoken from the place she is now sitting – on the 17th January 2019.

I took her at her word.

A committee of the Scottish Parliament had been established to consider and report on the actions of the First Minister, of government officials and of special advisers over the botched investigation.

That committee would take evidence, deliberate and deliver a judgement.

Indeed the First Minister demanded of members of this chamber the same high standard she claimed to set for herself.

She said, : “... it strikes me that people cannot call for

inquiries and then refuse to respect the work of those inquiries. I will respect the work of those inquiries; the question is, will others across the chamber?"

It was a fundamental question, to which at the time there seemed a self-evident answer.

What member of this Parliament would not respect and accept the verdict of a committee of parliament, established to investigate such serious matters?

But now the verdict is in and we have our answer to that fundamental question.

And those who have traduced the committee, have rubbished its work, thrown mud at its members, made baseless claims regarding its outcomes and disrespected its conclusions, are the members sitting behind the First Minister.

Yesterday, we publicly accepted the Hamilton report. For days, others have rejected the committee's.

And we note that Hamilton was crystal clear that the basis of this vote of no confidence – whether the First Minister misled this parliament or not – is a decision for this parliament and not for him.

And let's look at the committee's conclusions.

In its 192 pages, the report directly concludes that the First Minister misled the parliamentary committee regarding her initial meeting with Alex Salmond in her house in April 2018.

We already know that her original statement – that this meeting was the first she had heard of any such complaints – was also misleading. And months after she falsely stated that to parliament, she was forced to correct the record.

The committee also concludes the catastrophic failure to disclose documents was the reason for the high awarding of

costs and the wasting of taxpayers' money.

Similar to the judicial review, the committee was directly thwarted in its attempts to gather evidence and its verdict was scalding

“This is an unacceptable position for a parliamentary committee to find itself in when trying to scrutinise the Scottish Government, particularly when both the First Minister and the Permanent Secretary stated there would be full co-operation with the inquiry.”

How false that full co-operation pledge now looks.

But the most difficult bit to read of the whole report for all of us – and I expect the first minister too – are the words of the original complainers themselves who were “badly let down.”

Who talked of working in a culture where bad behaviour was endemic and “such behaviour was permitted and a blind eye was turned to it”

A charge substantiated by the civil service union the FDA who said that its members, working for this Scottish Government operated “in a culture of fear” and that issues “are not historical; they are current.”

No matter what your political colours, it should shame us all that working for your country's government – which should be a matter of pride – is actually a test of strength because of unacceptable behaviour and blind eyes being turned.

And on the subject of behaviour. I want to put on record that I believe the leaking of this report's findings last week was both damaging and wrong and I along with my party will support any investigation into that wrongdoing.

Presiding Officer,

The First Minister proclaimed her respect for the work of this

Parliament's committee of inquiry right up until the moment it became clear its outcome would not suit her.

Then her respect for it vanished in an instant.

I don't doubt that if this committee report had cleared her of wrongdoing it would be held up as being the will of this Parliament.

But a report which found her to have misled this parliament is instead denounced as an unprincipled hatchet job.

I have already said that I respect the Hamilton report's conclusions – but he publicly and specifically handed the question of whether the First Minister misled this parliament back to the parliament itself.

And let's be clear about what the committee inquiry of this parliament has found.

After taking months of evidence.

From dozens of witnesses.

Even including the First Minister's eight hours of testimony.

After all that evidence-gathering and deliberation, the committee found that Nicola Sturgeon misled this Parliament.

Nothing can erase that fact, however inconvenient it is to the First Minister and her supporters.

And let's remember, that by misleading this Scottish Parliament, she misled the people of Scotland too.

No First Minister who truly wanted to live up to the ideals of this Parliament should feel able to continue in post after having been judged guilty of misleading it.

How can Parliament have confidence in the words of a First Minister when those words have been found to be false?

The honourable thing would be to resign.

Whether the First Minister has that sense of honour is now between her and her conscience.

I move the motion in my name.”

LABOUR OPPOSED THE MOTION

Anas Sarwar, Scottish Labour leader said: “Earlier today, we held a minute’s silence on the steps outside this chamber to remember all those who have lost their lives over the past year, and all those grieving the loss of a loved one.

On this, the penultimate day before this parliament reaches the end of its five-year term, I would much rather we were reflecting on the impact of this dreadful pandemic – and debating what we need to do to ensure our country recovers in the years ahead.

Instead, we are confronted by a litany of government failings which led to two women being so badly let down.

And a Tory Party that cares not about the principles, but about the politics.

A harassment policy failed.

Two women were let down.

It has shaken trust in the system and risks discouraging victims to come forward.

It has called into question the integrity of government.

It has undermined the principles of transparency and accountability.

It has seen a misuse of public money.

There are huge failures and big questions to be answered.

There are no winners in this debate.

Not the SNP. The spectacle of using a harassment inquiry as a recruitment tool was grotesque.

And the Tories, in the face of all these failures, playing politics. Interested only in getting a scalp.

They announced they would bring a vote of no confidence before the First Minister had even given evidence to the committee.

They lodged this motion on the 4th of March – before the Hamilton inquiry or the committee inquiry had concluded.

Seriously?

On one side, a litany of failings from a government that let down two women.

On the other side, an opposition guilty of playing grubby party politics on an issue as serious as sexual harassment.

This is a day of shame for our Parliament.

Scotland deserves a better government. And it deserves a better opposition.

From the outset, I have made it clear that we would not prejudge the outcomes of the inquiries.

That we would remove party and personality.

I accept the conclusion of the report published yesterday.

But I also accept the conclusion of the cross-party report published today by a committee of this parliament, which highlights a catalogue of errors.

And yet still nobody has taken responsibility for the catastrophic failings by this government.

There are still serious questions for the Permanent Secretary and for the First Minister too, because the buck ultimately stops with her.

It cheapens this Parliament to have the Government attacking the work of the committee.

The SNP's tactics risk calling into question the verdict of every committee of this parliament ever.

Members have spent months scrutinising and investigating in an attempt to get the truth – often in the face obstruction from the government.

There are huge challenges ahead for our country.

I tell you, we can't come back to a parliament like this after the 6th of May.

Using this chamber as a game designed to divide our country further.

Earlier today I lodged an amendment to this motion which recognised the gravity of the government's failures and demanded that someone takes responsibility, whilst also calling out the shameless game-playing by the Conservatives.

That amendment was rejected, which I regret. So, as happens far too often in Scottish politics, we are left once again with a binary choice.

Do I have confidence in the way the First Minister, her team, and senior members of the government have handled this matter?

Do I have confidence in this government's record and their ability to focus us on a national recovery coming through Covid?

No, I do not.

But on what I hope is their second last day as Scotland's main opposition party, I also have no confidence in a Tory Party which today seeks to use this awful episode in our country's history in the futile and vain pursuit of a cheap political scalp, contradicting what they say here with what they say in another parliament elsewhere.

We cannot support a motion which is designed, not to deliver the kind of strong opposition they promised, but purely at dividing our country and our politics still further.

A failing government on one hand; a game-playing opposition on the other.

Our politics must be better than this.

Our people deserve better than this.

For the sake of the people of Scotland, coming through Covid, and with the huge challenge and task that faces us, we can't come back to this.

Scotland deserves a better government; and it deserves a better opposition."

Scottish Liberal Democrat leader Willie Rennie said after the vote: "Liberal Democrats abstained in this vote as we were just not prepared to support a motion that undermined the integrity of the respected, independent investigator. But equally we could not back a First Minister who leads a government that let down the women who stepped up to complain.

"Scottish politics is ugly right now with incendiary language, leaking private testimony of women and cruel celebration in the midst of this tragedy. This must change. The country deserves a progressive alternative to this poisonous, bitter SNP versus Conservative dynamic. The voters have the chance to make that happen in seven weeks.

"The debate in parliament must not be the end of this. We

need to understand how the complaints system will change and who will be held responsible for the significant errors made. This cannot be allowed to happen again.”