

Scottish Conservatives Conference – Ross is focused on the priorities

At the Scottish Conservatives conference in Glasgow today, leader Douglas Ross said that the Scottish Conservatives is the only party focused on the country's real priorities.

He used the speech to unveil a series of new policies including a new energy strategy paper. You can read that at the foot of the article.

This is the text of his speech:

“Conference, I want to start by congratulating you all.

For years, in election after election, we were told that Nicola Sturgeon was unstoppable. That it was a question of when, not if, she would deliver independence.

How many times did we see newspaper headlines saying that Scotland was on the cusp of Indyref2 – one particular paper ran that story every other day.

Often it seemed like we were the lone voice of criticism. The only party opposing her demands for a second independence referendum. The only party challenging her handling of the pandemic. The only party standing up to her gender reforms.

We knew that her government and her party, shrouded in secrecy, was not as squeaky clean as they liked to portray. And we were criticised again and again for going against the Holyrood consensus who heaped praise her. But no one is saying we are wrong, now.

Nicola Sturgeon's legacy lies in tatters. Her political career ended in failure. And all of you deserve credit for seeing her off.

As the Prime Minister said this morning, it was the Scottish Conservative & Unionist Party that stopped the SNP from winning a majority just two years ago.

It was Scottish Conservative & Unionist MSPs that fought her dangerous Gender Reform Bill every step of the way. And it was our Scottish Conservative Secretary of State for Scotland, my friend Alister Jack, who stood up for the rights of women and girls by sending this flawed Bill back to the SNP Government.

Nicola Sturgeon kept talking about wiping out the Tories. Yet because of all of your hard work, it is her that is gone.

Without Nicola Sturgeon, the SNP have entered into total meltdown. The formerly legendary discipline has evaporated, the unity has now totally broken down. Former colleagues have become bitter rivals, the party has run out of cash, the police have arrested senior officials.

And to top it all off Humza Yousaf has become First Minister. I can't think of a more obvious sign of a party in crisis than that.

As Kate Forbes so memorably said, when he was transport minister the trains were never on time. When he was justice minister, the police were strained to breaking point. And when he was health minister there were record high waiting times. Thank you Kate, for that Highland honesty and for doing our

work for us.

We've been saying that for years! Now clearly those in the SNP also agree – the result of the SNP election proved that. Almost half of his own party didn't think he was up to the job either.

During the leadership contest Humza Yousaf proudly proclaimed himself the continuity candidate, a comment that must haunt him now.

But it's true – as SNP Leader he has continued the same divisive approach as his predecessor.

Continuing to campaign for independence, continuing to engineer constitutional conflicts with the UK Government, continuing to ignore the real priorities of the Scottish people.

In another one of his ill-advised self-proclamations, Humza Yousaf called himself the First Activist, and that pretty much sums up his whole approach to government.

He is more interested in being the "First Activist" than First Minister – in obsessing over splitting up communities than he is on appealing to the country, in uniting the SNP rather than uniting Scotland, in being a nationalist cheerleader than a national leader.

He even appointed a Minister for Independence in his government solely to drive forward the SNP's political obsession. That is taxpayer's money shamefully being taken away from our public services to pay the wages of a nationalist campaigner.

In yet another claim, Humza Yousaf said that he would shift independence into "fifth gear". Yet instead, with this famously uninsured driver at the wheel, the campaign is going into reverse. The campervan has stalled.

If Ash Regan's independence thermometer was in operation, the mercury would have fallen out the bottom.

The SNP's financial troubles have blown a huge hole in their economic case for independence. Remember, the SNP wanted to hold an independence referendum in just six months' time – they can't even find an auditor in the same timeframe.

They wanted to set up a central bank – when they can't even submit their own accounts.

They would borrow billions of pounds from the taxpayer to finance a new country – when they still owe tens of thousands of pounds to Peter Murrell.

And just for Greg Hands, I'm surprised the police haven't found a note from Nicola Sturgeon saying that there is no money left.

If I'd known the real state her party was in, I'd have bet Nicola Sturgeon a lot more than £100 that I would outlast her. I'd make the same bet with Humza Yousaf – but I'm not sure he can afford it.

But seriously, the SNP cannot even manage their own accounts, how could they be trusted with the finances of an independent Scotland?

Nobody will ever believe a nationalist on currency, pensions or balancing the books ever again.

We've always known that our arguments on trade, currency and jobs were stronger, and the 2014 referendum proved that. But now the SNP lack any credibility. Through their own blunders, the nationalists have crashed the case for independence.

Yet incredibly, despite all the damage that has been done, Humza Yousaf still won't put the blame on his predecessor for the state of his party. Even with an ongoing police investigation, he is so indebted to his puppet masters that he

can't cut the strings from Nicola Sturgeon and Peter Murrell.

The most powerful couple in the ruling party of government were running the show as a private affair. Well, together they have smashed to pieces any notion that the SNP are of a higher standard than other parties.

And because Humza Yousaf can't bring himself to cut the former leadership loose, this scandal just continues to get worse.

However, we can't afford to be complacent. The SNP are down, yes, but they are not out.

We need to work hard to seize the opportunity we've been presented rather than reveling in their misery. Because the SNP are the party of government, responsible for managing our vital public services and supporting our economy.

At a time when families across Scotland are worried about the state of our country, worried about whether they can make ends meet, worried about their relatives stuck on an NHS waiting list for months and years, worried about their job in a changing economy.

This SNP Government is too distracted by their internal scandals and their obsession with independence to focus on the big challenges Scotland faces today.

We saw that during Humza Yousaf's attempt at a relaunch last week – just 20 days into the job. We were boldly promised that he would set out his 'priorities for government'.

Yet instead, what we got was the First Minister defending more scandal with one of his MSPs arrested by the police.

For years we've said that the SNP were unwilling to get on with the day job but they are now becoming increasingly incapable of delivering the leadership Scotland needs.

And all the while the real priorities of the Scottish people are being ignored.

The SNP Government aren't talking about how we rebuild our health service from the pandemic and Humza Yousaf's mismanagement.

It's from our benches that people hear Sandesh Gulhane standing up for his healthcare colleagues and patients.

The SNP aren't talking about the state of our economy and the damage the Greens in government are doing to it. But people can see Liz Smith campaigning for rates relief and reform for Scottish businesses.

The Nationalists aren't talking about how 16 years of an SNP government has devastated Scottish education and let down a generation of young people, so it's left to Stephen Kerr to set out plans to restore Scottish educational standards.

Right across Scotland people of all political backgrounds – right and left, unionist and nationalist, are looking for a party to focus on the issues and services that matter to them.

In Anas Sarwar's Labour, they see a party more interested in soundbites and playing politics – than standing up for the views of a majority of Scots.

He whipped his MSPs to back the SNP's gender reform bill and supports Humza Yousaf's legal challenge against the UK Government. No party focused on Scotland's real priorities would support the nationalists in playing their constitutional games in these challenging times.

Anas Sarwar has given Humza Yousaf's government a free pass to pursue their political obsession. Instead of opposing the SNP, he is opposing the views of a majority of Scots and even a majority of Labour voters.

And in supporting the SNP, he is only helping them to keep the Scottish Parliament from focusing on the issues that really matter to the Scottish public.

So it's the Scottish Conservatives that are the only party voters can trust to always stand up to the SNP Government when they refuse to prioritise the issues that really matter.

We are focused on the real priorities of the Scottish people.

And we offer them a vision of a better Scotland with credible plans to deliver it.

We know one of the biggest issues of concern to them is rising household bills. Vladimir Putin has been using global energy markets as a weapon in his illegal war against Ukraine, driving up heating costs for ordinary working families and endangering our supply.

Rishi Sunak and the UK Government have already taken decisive action to cap bills to protect households from the worst of these rises.

But as a longer term fix we need to ensure that we back Scotland's energy sector to secure our supply. However, under the influence of their Green coalition partners, the SNP continue to fail Scotland's oil and gas sector.

Ironically the former party of 'Scotland's oil' now wants to shut down North Sea production as soon as possible – putting tens of thousands of Scottish jobs at risk. And Labour backs that position wholeheartedly.

Under my leadership the Scottish Conservatives will always stand up for North East workers and the sector that employs them. We will always put their jobs first. Through the hard work of our strong team of North East MPs and MSPs we are now the only party standing up for Scotland's oil.

But that doesn't mean that we are opposed to delivering Net Zero, because achieving our climate goals will also help us to cut bills for families through reducing demand.

The majority of Scottish families live in housing that doesn't meet modern energy efficiency standards. Hundreds of thousands of households are seeing hundreds of pounds of their money seeping through old windows, walls and roofs every month.

Yet many cannot afford the thousands or even tens of thousands of pounds required to better insulate their homes.

The SNP Government has set out plans for the social rented sector, but homeowners shouldn't be forced to help deliver a government target without government support.

That is why the Scottish Conservatives would introduce a Help to Renovate Scheme. This would ensure that every Scottish homeowner has access to grants and loans for energy efficiency improvements.

Net Zero must also be delivered with community consent and benefit at its heart. Yet SNP Ministers have overturned local planning objections in favour of wind farm developers. That is a Holyrood power grab on our communities.

I experienced this when I chaired the Planning Committee on Moray Council several years ago, and it continues today.

At the same time, communities receive a pittance in contributions from developers and operators. Those communities deserve to benefit directly from local projects that we are all reliant on for our energy security.

That is why I am announcing today that we will bring forward a Community Energy Benefit Law.

This would ensure that those communities, not the SNP Government, have the final say on energy developments in their local area and it would force developers and operators to

negotiate deals that make meaningful financial payments to communities – which could be used directly for cutting energy bills.

When I was out in the Western Isles last year and up in Shetland just a couple of weeks ago this was an issue raised and a request made by many. The Scottish Conservatives have listened, and this proposal would not only create an incentive to unblock planning barriers to energy infrastructure.

It would also ensure that families and communities always benefit directly from those developments. Taken together, these plans that we're publishing in a policy paper today, will deliver lower bills for Scottish families have the final say on Scotland's energy future.

Another big challenge we face is the state of Scotland's NHS.

It is unbelievable that the SNP were so impressed by Humza Yousaf's running of our health service that they decided to make him First Minister.

Even he thought he had done such an awful job, that he had to appoint a Cabinet Secretary for NHS recovery – and boy is it needed.

The worst A&E waiting times in history – with 53,000 patients stuck for more than half a day last year and one in seven Scots on an NHS treatment list – some of whom have been waiting for years.

Our NHS is in crisis.

For months the Scottish Conservatives alongside healthcare professionals have said that the SNP's flimsy recovery plan is not cutting it.

And we set out our own plans to help the NHS cope with the worst of the winter crisis – including allowing patients to

see live A&E waiting times, expanding same day operations and introducing maximum waiting times.

Yet this tin-eared government ignored our plan and the concerns of patients and professionals.

The Scottish Conservatives know that more than anything else Scots just want an NHS that is there for them and their loved ones when they need it most.

We know that one area under threat is the future of local GP services. The SNP are still failing to deliver on their funding promises to general practice.

The Remote and Rural General Practice Working Group delivered their recommendations in January 2020 to ensure that GP surgeries have the funding and staff they need to continue. Yet those recommendations have been gathering dust on the shelf rather than being implemented.

So the Scottish Conservatives would implement those plans as a matter of urgency to save our surgeries – not just in rural areas – but right across the country.

We also need to focus on the substantial health challenges that Scotland faces.

We are holding this conference in the fantastic city of Glasgow, but 311 Glaswegians died of drugs in 2021 – the highest number in the country, every one a life that could have been saved. A family mourning a loved one failed by a system that doesn't work.

For years Nicola Sturgeon's eye was off the ball and it seems that Humza Yousaf will be no different. The SNP are letting some of the most vulnerable people in Scotland die by not giving them access to the treatment options they deserve.

That is why we're continuing the work to pass the Right to Recovery Bill that would give Scots legal access to the

addiction recovery treatment they need.

Yet we need to go further in tackling the big public health killers that blight our country. For example, a recent Public Health Scotland report found that over the last decade suicide was the biggest killer of young people in our country.

Sadly that is the experience of 753 families in Scotland last year.

We have to do more.

That is why we would roll out mental health ambulances to ensure there is a dedicated responder for mental health emergencies. and we would give mental health crisis centres the funding they deserve.

If we tackle the big public health challenges facing Scotland, we also save our NHS resources in the long-term – and put the relentless decline in standards into reverse.

That is what we can achieve with a government that is focused on the task of leading our health service instead of one that is content to manage decline while its attention is elsewhere.

Our NHS is Scotland's most treasured institution, it needs a government that gives it the focus it deserves.

Speaking of top priorities, I'm long enough in the tooth to remember the SNP Government saying that education was their number one priority. I wonder if even Humza Yousaf believes that anymore.

When I was growing up Scottish education was the envy of the world, yet, over the last 16 years, our schools have fallen to record lows in international league tables and Nicola Sturgeon completely failed in her goal of closing the attainment gap.

The next generation of Scots, my children and yours, are being

left poorer because of the actions of this SNP Government. That for me is the greatest failure of their time in office.

When I look at my two boys, Alistair and James, I know that one of the biggest reasons I'm in politics is to deliver better life opportunities for them and children like them up and down the country. What kind of a society are we if we don't prioritise that?

My own parents – my mum a school cook and my dad a farm labourer – didn't have much but they worked as hard as they could to give me and my sisters the best start in life.

We in this party know that a good education is the best way to deliver no matter where people live.

So even in these times of stretched resources, we must prioritise restoring Scotland's education for the next generation. It means giving teachers the support and even more importantly the trust to teach.

Firstly, we need to attract good teachers to come to the profession and crucially to stay in it. Teachers are burnt out, they feel like this SNP Government is asking more and more of them but not upholding its end of the bargain by tackling the issues that make their job more difficult.

That's why the Scottish Conservatives discussed plans this morning on a 'New Deal' for teachers.

Our Deal would cut down on paperwork, give teachers more time to prepare high quality lessons and reward them for extra classes and after school teaching. This would incentivise teachers to go above and beyond to help every pupil to achieve their potential.

We would also increase the powers of headteachers to take decisions over the running and priorities of their school and improve the teaching of essential life skills, so that

teaching is more aligned with needs of pupils rather than national targets set by Holyrood.

Taken together – with our existing plans for a National Tutoring and Mentoring Service, increased subject choice and improved STEM teaching, the Scottish Conservatives have a plan to restore Scottish education.

Where the SNP have failed, we would make giving the next generation the best start in life our number one priority.

But we know that learning and skills development can't just be for children and young people. As our economy changes, people will have to change careers. Yet in Scotland we don't do anywhere near enough to support those workers.

Some of the most dynamic economies in the world have strong support for adult learning and re-skilling. It needs to be at the core of how we tackle the fourth industrial revolution and the productivity challenge.

That is why the Scottish Conservatives have proposed the creation of a National College and why we would give every Scot a Right to Retrain through use it or lose it skills funding.

So that wherever people live, and whatever their ability, they can access high quality education and training for upskilling and reskilling.

And so that we can deliver growth today and, in the future.

We heard earlier in his remarks and his answers to questions just how passionate Rishi Sunak and the UK Government are to see Scotland's economy thrive and grow.

But the SNP and their Green partners see growth as an evil. They believe that wealth, business and enterprise are dirty words. Supporting businesses for them means hiking taxes and introducing a botched Deposit Return Scheme, a scheme Lorna

Slater was humiliatingly forced to delay.

You'd hope the most knowledgeable voice in Parliament on this issue would be the Minister in charge, but it wasn't. Maurice Golden has been all over the detail on this, warning the government for months about the problems they were creating.

Through his persistent campaigning we now have a delay to the scheme, but it needs an overhaul if it is actually going to work.

The Scottish Government is clearly anti-business but we in the Scottish Conservatives are unashamedly pro-business, pro-growth and pro-worker.

We were the only party holding the government to account over its slow payment of grants and lifting of restrictions, during the pandemic.

We are the only party challenging anti-business policies like the rent freeze and short-term let controls. And we are the only party that is opposed to the raising of taxes on 1.4 million Scottish workers.

Where other parties pretend to be false friends to the business community it is the Scottish Conservatives that actually stands up for their interests. For people of all political backgrounds, who believe in a competitive, Scottish economy, this party is your natural home.

Yet it is not just economic growth that the SNP and the Greens have put at risk but rural and coastal livelihoods too.

Humza Yousaf's government – propped up by the wine bar revolutionaries Patrick Harvie and Lorna Slater – is intent on making it harder for farmers to farm and fishermen to fish.

As someone who studied at agriculture college and represents so many coastal areas, those sectors and communities will always be at the heart of this party's agenda.

One issue they face is rural theft – which costs our farmers millions of pounds each year. That is why I can announce that Rachael Hamilton will bring forward a bill in the Scottish Parliament to better protect farm equipment from being stolen and sold on.

We will also deliver a Rural Development Bank to invest in rural projects and businesses and change procurement rules to ensure that public bodies, like schools, use good local food, so that the Scottish public sector backs Scottish farmers.

And for Scotland's coastal communities we will oppose the blanket introduction of Highly Protected Marine areas every step of the way.

Under my leadership, the Scottish Conservatives will always be the champion of rural Scotland and our food producers.

Another area in which the Scottish Conservatives are challenging the Holyrood consensus and representing the majority of Scots is justice.

The SNP have watered down sentencing so far that even rape is no longer considered an automatic jail sentence.

Let that sink in, in Scotland we are giving community sentences to rapists.

This SNP Government is attacking women's safe spaces and protections through the Gender Reform Bill, while also taking a soft stance on the men who commit horrendous crimes.

On justice, Humza Yousaf's government has all of the wrong priorities and values. The rights and protections of criminals are being put above victims whose lives have been devastated.

The Scottish Conservatives are the only party demanding a wholesale change in how justice is delivered in Scotland and backing our police to tackle crime.

We want to see whole life sentences introduced for the worst crimes and at this conference we have set out plans to toughen up Community Payback Orders. And through Jamie Greene's Victims Law we have a plan to put victims first in our justice system.

While the other parties all support a soft-touch approach to justice, the Scottish Conservatives are the only party who believe that crime should be properly punished by the law.

One such crime not being properly tackled is spiking. Imagine just going for a drink at the local pub and vomiting and passing out after just a single drink.

Well, that is the experience of one in ten women across the UK. In the last year there were 444 incidents reported to Police Scotland.

Spiking is a significant risk to both women and men across Scotland. That is why I was delighted to see my colleague Russell Findlay announce on STV last night Scottish Conservative plans to tackle this awful crime.

This Bill would ensure that testing kits and trained staff are available at premises as a condition of licensing.

This would mean that anyone who suspects their drink has been spiked can get it immediately tested, ensuring that the victim is protected and there is a significantly higher chance of catching the culprit. And we can tackle the scourge of spiking.

Throughout this conference we are bringing forward the policies that matter to people across Scotland.

A Community Benefit Law and a Help to Renovate Scheme to cut family bills.

Protecting GPs and delivering better mental health emergency response.

Offering teachers, a new deal to restore Scotland's education system for the next generation.

Investing in a Right to Retrain to build the skills we need to grow Scotland's economy and create good jobs.

Tackling spiking and toughening up community sentencing to put our justice system on the side of the victims.

Those are just some of the policies we are taking forward to tackle the real priorities of the Scottish people.

We will hold the SNP Government to account. We will represent the views of the majority of our country who feel that the Holyrood consensus does not speak for them.

But we will also take forward our own positive ideas and solutions, to show that the Scottish Conservative Party have an optimistic and ambitious vision for our country's future.

This failing SNP Government, mired in scandal and sleaze, cannot focus on governing our country. They cannot tackle the big challenges Scotland faces.

It is painfully obvious that Humza Yousaf is not up to the job of being First Minister.

At the general election next year, people across Scotland have a choice. They can give Humza Yousaf a blank cheque – the thumbs up to continue to lead an incompetent government and to focus on the priorities of the SNP.

Or they can unseat SNP MPs and their referendum obsession, and send a strong signal to Humza Yousaf's government to focus on the real priorities of Scotland.

And the best way that Scots can do this in seats right across our country is to vote for the Scottish Conservatives.

We've made a strong start at this conference, but this can

only be the beginning of our mission.

We need to re-earn the trust of people who have supported us in the past and reach out to people who have never considered us before.

The vast majority of Scots, of all political backgrounds, are just looking for a party to focus on the bread-and-butter issues that matter to them.

We need to be that party.

As the Nicola Sturgeon-era of Scottish politics comes crashing down we enter into a new chapter in our nation's history.

The SNP are losing the trust of the Scottish people, but no party has yet filled that vacuum. All bets are off, Scotland stands at a crossroad.

If we want the country to take a fresh look at our party, then we need to offer the positive vision Scotland needs.

We need to be a party for all of Scotland – focused on improving the lives of people up and down the country. We need to rise above partisan interest to tackle the big challenges we all face.

And show the Scottish people – in every community across our country – that the Scottish Conservatives are focused on Scotland's real priorities.

Thank you.”




Loading...



Taking too long?

🔄 Reload document

|  [_Open in new tab](#)