

Calls for “utterly unreliable” Lib Dem leader to go

Scottish Lib Dem leader, Alex Cole-Hamilton MSP, is under pressure to consider his position after it emerged he did not receive special dispensation to hold a public meeting which attracted a 1,000 strong crowd and broke Covid regulations.

The Scottish Government branded claims that the August 2020 meeting in Edinburgh’s Gyle Park had been green-lighted by the then Justice Secretary, Humza Yousaf, as “simply inaccurate”, stating that “no dispensation whatsoever” was granted.

The disparity in Mr Cole-Hamilton’s recollection of events was highlighted in an Edinburgh Reporter investigation which probed the veracity of his dispensation claim – and embarrassingly comes at a time when his own party has called for serious sanction on MSPs who behave inappropriately.

Following our report, politicians have called on Mr Cole-Hamilton to consider his position and there is speculation that he may be the subject of a report to the MSP watchdog, the Ethical Standards Commissioner.



Tommy Sheppard MP for Edinburgh East

Edinburgh East MP, Tommy Sheppard, said: "There's a prima facie case that he broke the regulations quite blatantly and publicly, which is not a good look for an elected politician,

particularly not one who is so keen at hurling accusations about misdemeanors and impropriety at other people.

“I think we are due an explanation from Mr Cole-Hamilton and I think he’s got questions to answer. My advice to him would be that he ought to exercise a little humility and contrition.”

Edinburgh Greens councillor, Susan Rae, said: “It would be wise at this point for Mr Cole-Hamilton to perhaps reflect on how his continued duplicitous behaviour reflects on his colleagues – particularly those in Council. I recognise however that this is highly unlikely.”

Michelle Thomson, MSP for Falkirk East, said: “The information obtained by The Edinburgh Reporter proves the utter unreliability of the word of Alex Cole-Hamilton.

“He organised a large gathering during Covid at which not only did he break the rules but led nearly 1,000 citizens to do likewise. Having done so, there appears to be clear evidence that his claims regarding so-called special permission were untrue. He should be considering his position.”

The meeting was arranged to debate controversial plans to introduce a Low Traffic Neighbourhood in East Craigs and earlier Mr Cole-Hamilton said he had been advised by The Scottish Government’s National Clinical Director, Jason Leitch, that it would be categorised as an outside event with a maximum of 200 people permitted.



Cllr Vicky Nicolson PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter
Inverleith councillor Vicky Nicolson, who in August 2020 was employed by the Health and Social Care Partnership and who was seconded to support short-staffed home care teams, said: “This was a difficult time for staff, individuals needing care and their families, and our courageous front line workforce were abiding by the rules whilst caring for people, many of whom were being discharged from hospital.

“Any event which was unlawful makes a mockery of the work the Health and Social Care workforce undertook and the sacrifices made by families. There are serious questions about whether Alex Cole-Hamilton misled people and he needs to answer this in full as these issues are too important to be swept under the carpet.”

Cllr Lesley Macinnes, who attended the meeting as Transport Convener, and had various discussions with Mr Cole-Hamilton prior to the event, said: “I am very grateful to The Edinburgh Reporter for discovering a more accurate picture of the background to this public meeting than had previously been put

out by Alex Cole-Hamilton. At no point did he mention any discussions with the then Justice Secretary, as he has now claimed.

“When I arrived to speak at the meeting I was shocked by the number of people in attendance. It broke that clear (200 people) limit and no attempts seemed to be made to limit the crowd size by the organisers.

“Mr Cole-Hamilton and his fellow speakers helped create an unnecessarily hostile atmosphere at that meeting which meant the pros and cons of the proposals could not even be effectively shared. I was disappointed and frustrated then by his approach to this. This latest revelation is equally disappointing and it raises concerns about how much trust can be placed, by any of us, on what has been said.”

The meeting was also on the radar of Edinburgh’s most senior police officer, Chief Superintendent Sean Scott, who said that Police Scotland had been aware of the planned event and that while no police presence was required, local officers patrolled the area as part of routine duties.

The Divisional Commander for Edinburgh said: “The officers observed the gathering was attended by a larger number of than was permitted under legislation for live outdoor events and fed this information back to senior officers. The matter was then raised with council officials in relation to Covid-19 legislation.”

A spokesperson for the City of Edinburgh Council said: “The Council was not officially notified of the event and there was no official permission in place. If Mr Cole-Hamilton had notified the Council, officers would have advised him about the restrictions in place.”

Mr Cole-Hamilton was not available to comment on calls for him to resign but earlier a Scottish Liberal Democrat spokesperson said: “Mr Cole-Hamilton sought approval from both the Justice

Secretary and the police for a socially distanced event to take place on a matter of importance to his constituency. Many residents attended along with Conservative and SNP politicians. The police attended and raised no concerns.”

Covid restrictions in force at the time of the Gyle Park meeting permitted “certain outdoor live events (involving open space or organised seating) with physical distancing and restricted numbers – subject to guidance”.

A petition was set up in May demanding the resignation of the Scottish Liberal Democrat leader following comments he made during an independence debate at Holyrood and so far has been signed by nearly 10,000 people.



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