



Welcome to my latest newsletter, which gives a flavour of my activities on your behalf at Holyrood.

As you can imagine, the debate continues to be dominated by the impact of Covid-19, and within the last week we have seen a further announcement from the First Minister on a relaxation of lockdown restrictions. While these are welcome, I remain concerned about some aspects of what is being proposed, and in particular whether enough is being done to secure the future of the economy.

We are seeing this week a reopening of high street shops, and I am urging all local residents to do what they can to support local retailers who are now reopening who need business now more than ever before if they are to survive in the longer term.

As ever, if you have any problems I might be able to help with, or any issues you just wish to raise with me as a discussion point, please do not hesitate to be in touch.

With best wishes,

Murdo

## Issues that will need addressed in the 'new normal'

There are several issues which will need to be addressed as the country eases out of lockdown and residents get accustomed to what life will be like in the 'new normal.'

I looked over the Higgins Report, which was produced by an advisory group to look at how to plan for Scotland's economic recovery following the devastating impact of Covid-19.

However, although I welcome the fact that this report has been produced, I feel the Scottish Government need to address the fact that more of the country's workforce will continue to work from home and therefore it is essential they have good broadband service and speed. We will also have to reconfigure the country's High Streets due to the decline in retail sales.

It is very likely that in the future, more and more people will work from home. That means that connectivity - good quality broadband - is essential in all of Scotland, but particularly in rural areas.

That must be given an even greater priority than it is now. We have seen delays in the Scottish Government's flagship R100 which promised to provide broadband to 100% of Scotland's residents by 2021.

And the nature of retail is going to change even more rapidly. Before Coronavirus, we had already seen a significant shift to online retail purchases, and the decline of the High Street. That is the trend that will now be

accelerated as people have become comfortable with shopping from home to an even greater extent.

So, the decline of the High Street is an even greater challenge. In that context, the wholesale review of business rates we have been calling for for years has now become much more serious.

We need to properly consider a digital sales tax, to level the playing field between High Street sellers and online sellers.

And we need to consider how to reimagine the High Street of the future, where retail will be a much less significant part. We need to consider if we can repurpose what were retail shops into other leisure uses or convert them to residential accommodation.

While the Higgins Report is of some assistance in framing the discussions, we are going to need a lot more action and a lot less conversation, if we are going to make a difference.



Murdo Fraser underlines the financial help that has been provided to Scotland from the UK Government

## The SNP U-Turn On Schools

I welcomed the dramatic U-turn from Education Minister John Swinney on the back-to-school plan but feel this was a decision purely made due to increasing

concern and anger from parents, along with pressure from the Scottish Conservative Party.

Mr Swinney recently told the Scottish Parliament that all Scotland's school pupils will return to their education in August full-time, with no social distancing unless there is a sudden spike in cases of Covid-19.

The U-turn has to be welcomed but it is a pity the Scottish Government didn't credit the campaign led by parents who had decided enough was enough, and whose feelings were more responsible than anyone for Mr Swinney's change of plan.

The previous proposal of blended learning, which would have seen some pupils only attend school once a week, as was the proposal for Perth High School, was appalling. However, parents made their feelings known - they understood the impact of 'blended learning' on children's education.

Now teachers will have a short time to prepare for full-time education – all caused by the Scottish Government prevaricating over the return to school plan and the Education Minister's sudden change of heart.

It is a massive relief that the Scottish Government have for once seen common sense in this issue - it is just a pity it took pressure from parents and the Scottish Conservative Party to make them do so.

## Will Coronavirus Cure Prove Worse Than The Disease?

Last week's announcement from the First Minister of a relaxation of restrictions for the Coronavirus lockdown was welcome insofar as it went. Nevertheless, there were serious concerns raised by many in the business community at the slow pace of reopening compared to other parts of the United Kingdom. In the hospitality sector in particular, many were left worrying whether they could survive a further lockdown period, with the Scottish Tourism Alliance stating that many traders with an outdoor area who had planned to open earlier would now be "bitterly disappointed" that that would not be possible until the beginning of next month at the earliest.

Business aside, it is in relation to our schools that we saw the greatest concerns. The proposals for a new "blended learning" model, to apply from the 11<sup>th</sup> of August, when schools will reopen, attracted overwhelming criticism from education experts, from business, and across the political spectrum. We know

that the model of home learning that has been in place since March is simply not working for too many pupils. According to a survey published on Monday, two-thirds of parents say that their school has not been providing online lessons during the lockdown period. Despite the best efforts of teachers, it is simply proving too difficult to manage.

There is no indication that the blended learning to be introduced from August would show any improvement on this situation. As leading education advisers such as Kier Bloomer and Professor Lindsay Paterson have pointed out, those who would suffer the most under the new arrangements are children from less well-off backgrounds. According to Professor Paterson, this could mean that the attainment gap – which the SNP Government have pledged to close – could be five times worse by December.

Parents simply cannot understand how the new model could work with pupils at school for sometimes as little as one day per week, and having to be taught at home for the remainder. There is also a huge economic cost to this, as parents of school-aged children would not be able to return to work full time, potentially for up to a year. Little wonder that even voices within the SNP such as Alex Neil MSP, and former adviser Alex Bell, have slammed Education Secretary John Swinney's handling of the situation.

Last week's announcement from Swinney that the aim now is for a return to full-time schooling for all pupils from August, subject to a continued reduction in infection rates, is therefore very welcome, although it represents a screeching U-turn from a Government whose supporters have been quick to criticise the Prime Minister for moving England out of lockdown too fast. Clearly, pressure from the Scottish Conservatives and parents across the country has paid off, and the SNP Government have been left with no option but to reconsider its ruinous plans.

A full return to schools for all is still contingent on the numbers going in the right direction. In this context, we have to bear in mind the real risk of a faster spread of Covid-19 infection, and the dangers of a second spike in numbers. Evidence suggests that the risk of Covid-19 to school-aged children is extremely low, but we also need to recognise that there are adults working in the school environment whose interests have to be protected. It is a question

of balancing harms.

I have a real concern that in the whole debate about relaxing lockdown restrictions we have an understandable focus on the need to reduce the risk of Covid-19 infection, but insufficient attention is being paid to the longer-term health risks of an extended lockdown. We already know that in excess of 1200 people have died in Scotland as a result of lockdown, over and above normal death rates at this time of year, from non-Covid related illnesses – heart disease, stroke and cancer. We also know that, because of the cancellation of routine cancer screening and other treatments, people will die in one, two- or three-years' time, who might otherwise have survived, as a direct result of the diversion of NHS resources towards tackling Coronavirus.

Over and above that, there is the significant mental health impact from the isolation that lockdown has caused, particularly to many single people, the consequences of which are unlikely to be apparent for months, if not years, to come. And, finally, the long-term negative health impacts from a damaged economy, with failing businesses, and soaring unemployment, will be substantial.

We could be in a situation where the Coronavirus cure will prove more deadly than the disease. Any choices being made about the pace of relaxing lockdown restrictions have therefore to include an assessment of the balance of harms, in the short, medium and longer term. Every risk that exists from taking action to relax a restriction has to be weighed against the risks from not acting.

It is simply not clear at present that this balance of harms is being properly considered by the Scottish Government. Giving evidence to the Scottish Affairs Committee in Westminster last week, Linda Bauld, Professor of Public Health at Edinburgh University, said that she had “no idea” where the evidence for some of the Scottish Government’s lockdown decisions was coming from. This is a leading public health expert, one who has been supportive of the First Minister’s general approach to the Coronavirus pandemic, but if even Professor Bauld is not clear of the basis for decisions being made, what confidence can the public have in them?

When she launched her roadmap out of lockdown some weeks ago, Nicola Sturgeon said that she wanted to treat the Scottish people like adults. It is time that she started.

## **NHS Tayside Must Come Clean On Data Breaches**

A recent Freedom of Information (FOI) Act request submitted by the Scottish Conservative Party to NHS Tayside regarding the number of data breaches that had taken place in relation to Covid-19 test results led to the health body responding to say there were fewer than five such breaches.

NHS Tayside also said that due to the small number of patients involved, 'no further breakdown' of this information would be provided as disclosure of this information may lead to the identification of individuals.

The request had stipulated that the breach of one patient's data or test results should be treated as a single breach, even if multiple pieces of data were lost or hacked or sent to the wrong person/address at the same time.

While I acknowledge there are data protection laws, providing a response like this just raises more questions than answers. The Scottish Conservatives had not asked for details of the respective patients whose data was breached – merely the number of such breaches.

It is a poor state of affairs if NHS Tayside can't provide this information. Any such breach is a matter of great concern to the patients involved and NHS Tayside must ensure there are no repeats of such breaches of data.

## **Labour's Constitutional Confusion Continues**

Anyone hoping over the last few years for some clarity and consistency from the Scottish Labour Party on their position on the Constitution will have been disappointed. Trapped between the Scylla of the pro-Independence SNP, and

the Charybdis of the pro-Union Scottish Conservatives, the Labour ship has struggled to make progress, failing to find a middle way that might attract back former supporters lost to both larger Parties.

Under the former UK Leader Jeremy Corbyn, Labour had more positions on a second independence referendum than could be found in the pages of the Karma Sutra. Famously, at one point in the General Election campaign last Autumn, there were three different stances in the course of one 24-hour period. Against this backdrop, it is little wonder that Labour have lacked credibility on the constitutional issue, and that they lost all but one of their Scottish seats in December.

In an effort to make some progress on the issue, Scottish Labour adopted yet another policy position comprising (in their own words) “a firm policy statement against independence and a second referendum but for radical reform”. To the annoyance of some of their own MSPs, Labour are now stating that they *will* oppose a second independence referendum in the Holyrood elections due next year. Given their tragic history in these matters, it remains to be seen how long this new line will hold.

In line with comments made by Sir Keir Starmer during his recent leadership campaign, the new Scottish Labour stance talks about “a renewed partnership between all nations of the UK based on a progressive federal structure”. However, what this means in practice remains a mystery.

Starmer is by no means the first senior Labour figure to talk about a federal approach to the UK. Many other Labour voices, from Gordon Brown to Kezia Dugdale, have promoted the attractions of a federalist approach. As the elusive “third way” between Unionism and Nationalism, it certainly has political attractions. The problem is that federalism simply does not work in the context of the UK as it currently exists.

The essential challenge facing all proponents of UK federalism is that a four-nation federal structure, with England as one of the component units, would be so hugely imbalanced as to be unworkable in practice. With 85% of the overall population, and an overwhelming percentage of the wealth, the interests of England would always dominate. Conceivably, the First Minister of England (if

such a position were to be created) would be a more significant and powerful political figure than the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, which would be an absurd situation.

The alternative approach would be to federalise within England, breaking that country into self-governing regions. And yet, as we have seen over the past two decades, there is very little appetite within England for legislative assemblies to be created. Whilst devolution of power to city regions has progressed, and will continue to do so, the notion that Yorkshire might have different laws to Lancashire would strike the average Englishman as an absurdity. It is simply not going to happen within any conceivable timescale.

How Labour intend to address this essential difficulty is still entirely unclear, despite all the years they have had to think about the practicalities of federalism. That said, there are proposals put forward which would have benefits, among them the abolition of the House of Lords and its replacement with a Senate of the nations and regions, and the establishment of a UK Council of Ministers. In a paper I wrote last year for the think-tank Bright Blue Scotland, I put forward just such ideas as a means of reducing imbalances in the current UK constitutional arrangements, and support for these reforms is reflected across the political spectrum. But it all falls far short of the federalism that Labour now claim to support.

It is not just in relation to federalism that Labour's new position is riven with confusion. On the Fiscal Framework that governs the financial relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK, the new Labour policy paper states this: "There must also be a renegotiation of the Fiscal Framework so that Scotland is not financially penalised for tackling poverty and inequality through social security reforms, or financially penalised for relative economic underperformance". This is a breath-taking statement, and an astonishing repudiation of the Labour party stance taken at the time of both the Calman and Smith Commissions, which advanced financial devolution.

The whole principle that lay behind the fiscal devolution promoted by both Calman and Smith (and now made law through the two subsequent Scotland Acts) was that each part of the United Kingdom would bear the financial cost of political choices made by governments elected there. So, for example, an

expansion of social security within Scotland alone would have to be funded by Scottish taxpayers, and not those elsewhere in the UK. Similarly, if thanks to policies implemented by the Scottish Government, the Scottish economy performed relatively better than the rest of the UK, then the benefit of any tax uplift would come to the Finance Minister here, and not be shared with other parts of the UK.

Labour seem now to be rejecting this entire model and are demanding, effectively, that English taxpayers should pay for the policy choices made by Scottish politicians. This isn't federalism, or even devolution. Indeed, what is being proposed is actually a *reversal* of devolution. It would mean that there is no point to fiscal devolution at all, and that the tax-varying powers currently held by Holyrood are without purpose. Far from seeking to enhance devolution, Labour's new position seems to be that it should be rolled back.

I simply cannot imagine that this was the objective that Labour had in mind when they set out to update their policy position. And yet, that would be the outcome of the measures that they are currently proposing.

Anyone hoping that this latest statement from Scottish Labour would clear up the confusion around their stance on the constitution will have been left bitterly disappointed. All we see is yet more muddled thinking and lack of clarity. Former Labour-voting unionists who have switched to the Scottish Conservatives will want to keep their votes with a Party that respects the devolution settlement, and at the same time is firm in its support of the Union and in its rejection of another Independence referendum.

**Murdo Asked The Transport Minister When  
Driving Instructors Can Resume Work.**



I am hopeful that driving instructors can resume work soon after I raised the matter with the Transport Minister, Michael Matheson.

A constituent who is a self-employed driving instructor had contacted me, and like hundreds of similar people across the country, this instructor was desperate to know when it will be deemed safe to go back to work.

I therefore submitted a written question to Mr Matheson, the Transport Minister, asking him when self-employed driving instructors can resume work. Mr Matheson replied that the Scottish Government is developing guidance for driving instructors as a matter of urgency, which I welcome.

He stated that the guidance will be based on the best available public health advice in Scotland and will include clarification of what phase of the lockdown exit routemap this will be included in.

There are many self-employed driving instructors who have been idle for some time now, waiting on word of when they can get back to work, and there will also be many people who are keen to learn how to drive.

Obviously, the guidance will take into account the proximity of the driving

instructor and learner driver, but it is important that the Scottish Government give businesses like driving instructors an idea of when they can resume working as soon as possible.

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