



With the short autumn recess over, attention is now focussed on key issues which will be on the Holyrood agenda for the next eight weeks before Christmas notwithstanding any further lockdowns: how to improve parliamentary scrutiny over the SNP's Covid19 regulations, the UK Internal Market Bill and its effects on the devolved administrations, likewise, the effects of the UK Environment and Agriculture Bills on the devolved administration's, the SNP's "Brexit Continuity" Bill and, of course, the ongoing deliberations of the committee investigating the Scottish Government's handling of the issue raised by the Salmond inquiry.

Parliamentary Scrutiny of Covid-19 regulations

Many members of the public and many people on the front line facing up to all the increasing challenges of dealing with the second wave of Covid19 have rightly been very concerned about the facility which Nicola Sturgeon and Ministers have had to make decisions about Covid19. That concern particularly relates to decisions about which "tiers" and lockdowns are in place in each part of the country and what evidence has been used to underpin them.

There has not been nearly enough parliamentary scrutiny of these decisions and, frankly, in my opinion, that was not addressed sufficiently early. Finally, last week, the Scottish Government gave way and we debated the most recent changes on the floor of the chamber last Tuesday. No doubt, we will be back in the chamber tomorrow debating the next stage.....

Concerns over changes to the GP appointment process

Several people have rightly been in touch with me about the changes which have recently been put in place advising patients who wish to make an appointment that they will have to make an online booking rather than phone in to the surgery - a process which involves being able to access online and also form-filling. Not surprisingly, this is causing significant concern and anxiety not least because it has a disproportionate and detrimental effect on those patients who do not have access to or do not feel comfortable using online appointment procedures. I will be raising this issue in Parliament this week.

£2m gained for outdoor education



As readers know, I have been leading a campaign in Holyrood to ensure that the threatened closure of outdoor education centres does not happen. With 23,000 signatures on the public petition, very strong cross-party support for this move and some excellent work undertaken by the sector itself, there was considerable pressure placed on the Scottish Government to step in.

I am pleased that, in late October, they provided £2m of emergency funding to help the sector through this winter. This is welcome progress brought about by the extensive lobbying of the outdoor education sector and the cross-party group of MSPs who have lobbied the Scottish Government so hard in recent months.

There is universal agreement that outdoor education is one of the most precious assets in the whole educational experience and we cannot let centres close.

£2m for the immediate future will help to cover costs this winter but no-one - including the Scottish Government- should be in any doubt that a long-term strategy, properly funded, is urgently needed to ensure our centres can plan ahead for the post covid era. We must not let them down so I will be continuing to press the Scottish Government to work with the sector to secure long term sustainability. The next task is to find additional funds to support them.

My next meeting with the sector is on the 6th of November.

Supporting Businesses

Douglas Ross and Ruth Davidson have jointly called for a new Covid business advisory group to be set up and consulted with before future Covid decisions are taken. This was as a result of significant concerns raised by the hospitality and tourism sectors which have borne the brunt of the difficulties of Covid19 restrictions. Many businesses have felt alienated from front line discussions which has raised questions about how willing businesses are to accept and comply with the regulations. Douglas and Ruth quite rightly made clear that there had to be good quality data available as to why certain decisions were being taken.

Ruth Davidson said:

“The introduction of additional restrictions must be accompanied by the support and involvement of businesses to make sure Scottish jobs are protected as much as possible.

“Building in a business advisory council to this new system would help keep Scottish jobs safe by giving businesses the seat around the table that they’ve been crying out for throughout this pandemic.

“It’s also vital as we approach the winter months, where people typically struggle more anyway, that the Scottish Government are ahead of the game on tackling mental health.

“A Christmas loneliness strategy that considers the needs of families to meet safely would go a long way to helping keep the public onside as they’re asked to keep making sacrifices.”

For my part, at a very local level, recess offered me the opportunity to be out and about in the constituency engaging with local businesses as they battle against the restrictions imposed by Covid19. We owe so many people a huge debt of gratitude for their enterprise and

unfailing community spirit.

On one such visit, I was very pleased to see, at first hand, the success of the “pumpkin patch” at Ardbennie Farm.



Women in Sport Week 24th-31st October

It was a privilege for me as convenor of the cross party group on sport and someone who remains heavily involved in sport, both on and off the field, to help raise public awareness of all the benefits from sport for women. During the week organised by Student Sport Scotland, I participated in the short video (see below) and on Zoom calls with those students wanting advice and support about their activities during Covid19. It was heartening to hear from so many women and girls committed to pursuing a wide range of sporting activity and I am grateful to them all for sharing their stories.



<https://twitter.com/i/status/1319926905429217281>

Environment issues



It is essential that Scotland does not lose crucial environmental safeguards as the UK exits the EU. Around 80% of Scotland's environmental protections currently stem from EU legislation so it is crucial that we find ways to replace these safeguards.

As Scottish Conservatives, we do not however accept the SNP's proposals that new legislation will be required to ensure that Scotland "keeps pace" with all EU environmental law. This is because this not only provides Scottish ministers with far too many powers but also that it does not leave room for flexibility should we believe that non-EU environmental standards are higher than those in the EU.

We are very keen to see that the new post Brexit body, Environmental Standards Scotland (there will be similar bodies in England, Wales and N. Ireland) has full independence from government, that it has secure and transparent funding and that parliament - as distinct from Scottish ministers - oversee the appointments process.

I am in the process of working with colleagues on the Finance Committee regarding the amendments we can bring to stage 2 to ensure this does not just become a long arm of the Scottish Government.

House smoke and carbon monoxide alarms

There has been much concern recently, with the Scottish Government's smoke and carbon monoxide alarm legislation and thank you to all those readers of this newsletter who got in touch with me in recent days.

This legislation, which was due to come into force in February, mandated every home in Scotland to have various alarms installed and interconnected. This included a fire alarm in every living room or lounge, as well as in hallways and on landings. The average cost to each home owner was to be between £200 and £300.

However, thanks to the efforts of the Scottish Conservatives and my colleague Alexander Stewart who has been engaging with Scottish ministers, the legislation has now been postponed. It had not been thought through and little thought had been given to the cost implications for individuals and councils. Nor had consideration been given to who would be responsible for installing these alarms.

We will be pursuing this matter very carefully at Holyrood in the weeks ahead.

Alexander Stewart's written question can be read below.

Question S5W-32793: Alexander Stewart, Mid Scotland and Fife, Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party, Date Lodged: 28/10/2020

To ask the Scottish Government, in light of the most recent smoke, heat and carbon monoxide alarm regulations, whether it will (a) consider the costs associated with the procurement and installation of the equipment necessary to meet these when setting local authority budgets, (b) set an income threshold for homeowners to be eligible for government assistance to pay for any necessary installations and (c) (i) provide retailers with guidelines and (ii) put in place (A) tariffs and (B) standards to ensure that electrical suppliers are being fair to householders.

Current Status: Expected Answer date 11/11/2020

SNP Soft On Justice

The Scottish Government came under fire yet again last week for cancelling hundreds of thousands of hours worth of community sentences, just because it has been deemed inconvenient to carry out these sentences during the Covid-19 crisis.

Nicola Sturgeon's Government has a well established record of soft touch justice, just last year the SNP scrapped 1 year jail sentences, a move that was opposed by the Scottish Conservatives. However the SNP defended the move by insisting that offenders would not be let off for their crimes, but would receive community sentences instead of jail, while also insisting this would lower reoffending rates.

Now the Scottish Government has decided to outright cancel these community orders rather than delay them, it is unclear why the SNP are taking such a soft touch approach on justice. What is certain, is hundreds of violent offenders, drug dealers and sex offenders are not having to serve their sentences, or take part in the rehabilitation process, but instead are being let off the hook.

This is not putting the victims of crime first and is not in the best interest of society, this will only result in further offences committed by these offenders.

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NATS PLOT AMNESTY FOR LAZY CRIMINALS
Scheme to scrap 200,000 hours of community service

SNP ministers have been accused of betraying victims of crime with a plan to write off more than 200,000 hours of community service.
Under Scotland's current soft touch justice system, violent thugs,

By Ben Barland
drug dealers and sex offenders are frequently ordered to carry out unpaid work as an alternative to prison.
A leaked report by council umbrella body Cosla reveals an unprecedented

backlog of more than 700,000 hours of uncompleted community service work.
It states that the SNP administration "responded positively" to the idea of an unpaid work amnesty that would wipe out 30 per cent or 210,000 hours of punishments. The paper sets out options to tackle

Anton: I get away with murder on the dancefloor
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Alex Salmond Inquest

There was good news last week when the Information Commissioner ruled that more information must be provided by the Scottish Government following all the obfuscation and delay of previous weeks.

At the same time, it was revealed that a Scottish Government civil servant had deleted a 'forgotten' text from the then permanent secretary Leslie Evans - a text which was likely to be very relevant to the current investigation.

Also, it emerged that some serious questions were being asked about the legal advice that the Scottish government received when dealing with the sexual misconduct allegations against Alex Salmond, and the following the Alex Salmond enquiry at the Scottish parliament.

MSPs are now requesting that the full legal advice is published in addition to the release of any notes relating to the meetings between Sturgeon and Salmond.

We await the next developments.

Government told to release notes about Sturgeon meetings with Alex Salmond

By Rachel Watson
Deputy Scottish Political Editor

NICOLA Sturgeon's government has been ordered to hand over notes about meetings with Alex Salmond concerning harassment complaints against him.

Scotland's Information Commissioner has ruled that the notes must be made public after the Scottish Government originally refused to release them.

The First Minister has repeatedly claimed that meetings with Mr Salmond were SNP party business – and therefore no government record was required to be kept.

However, Scottish Information Commissioner Daren Fitzhenry has ruled that content provided to him suggested that some of the contact between the First Minister and Mr Salmond related to government rather than party business.

Mr Fitzhenry concluded that the Scottish Government 'withheld' documents when responding to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request on the matter.

The decision has intensified claims that Miss Sturgeon misled parliament over her contact with Mr Salmond. It comes after she admitted meeting his former adviser Geoff Aberdeen in March



Revelations: Alex Salmond, left, and Information Commissioner Daren Fitzhenry

Now publish legal advice, demand MSPs

LEGAL advice on the Scottish Government's botched probe into Alex Salmond should now be released, according to a majority of MSPs.

A motion has been submitted to the Scottish parliament by Tory MSP Oliver Mundell calling for the advice to be made public.

Labour, the Greens and the Liberal Democrats have all backed this – ensuring a parliamentary majority over the minority SNP government. Former First Minister Mr Salmond has also called for the advice to be published.

The Conservatives are set to seek an urgent

question on the issue at Holyrood today and bring forward a full parliamentary debate and vote as soon as possible. Mr Mundell said: 'We are calling for cross-party support from MSPs to back our motion and ask the Scottish Government to publish legal advice they received for the Alex Salmond judicial review.'

A Scottish Government spokesman said: 'Successive Scottish and UK governments have not disclosed the source or content of legal advice other than in the most exceptional circumstances.'

SALMOND INQUIRY

2018, where it was suggested there might be allegations of a sexual nature facing the former First Minister – later cleared of 13 counts of sexual assault following a criminal trial.

Miss Sturgeon previously told parliament she had first learned about the accusations from Mr Salmond in April 2018.

Scottish Conservative leader Douglas Ross said: 'This is indisputable evidence that Nicola Sturgeon has been misleading parliament.'

Mr Fitzhenry intervened after a number of the public approached him over the refusal to hand over documents as part of an FOI request. He found that ministers had 'withheld' documents and 'failed to comply' fully with FOI

laws, and that two notes were withheld under a section of FOI legislation which exempts information from being revealed if it might prejudice substantially the administration of justice.'

The notes were sent between Miss Sturgeon and the Permanent Secretary Leslie Evans, on June 6 and 7, 2018. Mr Fitzhenry said they must be released.

Mr Fitzhenry also identified a third document, which was not shared 'with any Scottish Government staff' and 'is not held on any Scottish Government

system'. He concluded that it is 'held by ministers'.

Miss Sturgeon has admitted meeting Mr Salmond three times in 2018 and speaking to him on the phone twice about two complaints of harassment made to the Government.

A Holyrood committee is examining the Government's botched handling of two complaints against Mr Salmond and the creation of a policy for dealing with such complaints. The Scottish Government said: 'We have disclosed the information

identified by the Commissioner, with the exception of one paragraph... We have appealed the Commissioner's decision to the Court of Session in relation to that paragraph since it raises legal issues which require further consideration.'

After being contacted by the Mail yesterday, the Government published the documents at 8pm – a letter from Miss Sturgeon to Mrs Evans confirming she met Mr Salmond on April 2; one from Mrs Evans confirming receipt; and a heavily-redacted third.

Remembrance Day

Remembrance Day will undoubtedly be very different this year when it comes to the arrangements, but not when it comes to the ongoing dedication of Poppy Scotland and the enthusiastic support of the public at large.

May I once again pay tribute to all the work which Poppy Scotland undertakes and also thank those people who are helping me to raise funds via the Poppy Scotland 2020 run which, along with several others, I will be participating in in the next few days.

Please remember. Every poppy counts.



And Finally, Foreign Policy Article

As we await this week's US presidential election results there has been much thought given to the future of the US/UK "special relationship ". These thoughts (published in the Telegraph) last week are from Nick Timothy:

Post-war Britain, a US secretary of state once said, had lost an empire but failed to find a role. Now, Brexit Britain has rejected its modern role and needs to decide how it should behave on the world stage. The likely election of Joe Biden, and the looming deadline for Britain to agree its relationship with the European Union, put this issue into sharp focus. Britain will soon leave the EU's single market and customs union, and Biden, ministers worry, will be a lukewarm ally at best.

Departure from the EU necessarily changes and disrupts Britain's trading policy and diplomatic strategy. While a deal with the EU is almost certain to be agreed, Brexit was in part a decision to pursue an independent trade policy and decide our own model of economic regulation. While a common EU foreign policy remains a way off, the absence of British leaders from the European Council will leave France and Germany to direct more European foreign policy, and push Britain to seek allies beyond the Continent.

Brexit is one reason ministers fear a President Biden will do Britain few favours. Democrats see Brexit as a close cousin of the Trump presidency. Biden believes leaving the EU is a terrible mistake, and will see Paris, Berlin and Brussels as partners in tackling climate change

and handling China. He is proud of his Irish ancestry, and has already threatened Britain on Ireland's behalf, saying there will be no US/UK trade deal if Brexit endangers the Good Friday Agreement.

And yet the fear of diplomatic estrangement is overstated. The rancour of Brexit and the bitterness of the negotiations will eventually fade to familiarity and normality. Britain and the Europeans – particularly France, which takes a different view of the world to Germany – will co-operate on shared threats and opportunities, building on bilateral relationships and membership of international institutions, like Nato and the United Nations Security Council. Something similar will play out with the United States. Our ties are sufficiently deep-rooted to survive poor relations between prime ministers and presidents. It is based on language, culture and commerce, and the relationship between the two governments is principally built on collaboration between their armed forces and intelligence agencies. This will continue and so will the alliance.

When it comes to the early priorities, Britain will matter more than pessimists fear. Biden wants to demonstrate a renewed commitment from America to multilateralism and fighting climate change. Next year, Britain will host the G7, when it plans to launch the D10 group of democracies concerned about the actions of China, and the next United Nations climate change conference. A Nato summit will provide a reminder that Britain remains Europe's strongest military and intelligence actor.

This brings us to the truth of the Atlantic alliance. It is not based on a mythical "special relationship" between two countries sharing a unique affinity, but on the convergence of interests. When our interests have diverged – like at Suez, or in Vietnam – the two countries have gone their own way. When they have converged, we have collaborated. A fair assessment should rest on this realistic understanding.

Such realism should lead us to conclude that our foreign policy must amount to more than a willingness to serve as America's junior partner, or as an addendum to EU communiqués. We need ministers to explain how they will restore our diplomatic reach, renew our military capabilities and forge new alliances.

Since Brexit we have seen encouraging steps. Britain organised international action against Russia after the Salisbury poisonings and in response to China's crushing of Hong Kong. With the West divided on how to handle Beijing, Britain's proposed D10 grouping might provide the forum to find unity. While the EU failed to agree to impose sanctions on Belarus, Britain did so without fuss. The Foreign Secretary, Dominic Raab, is quietly co-ordinating diplomatic activity with Australia and Canada.

But big questions remain. What is the Government's attitude to military intervention? And what are we prepared to invest in our military capabilities? The decision to delay the spending review has thrown the integrated review of defence, foreign and security policy into

doubt.

And what about international trade? Does the Government seek agreements that liberalise trade only with countries with advanced environmental and labour market protection? Does it really want a trade agreement with the United States, given controversy about food and animal welfare standards? Will it instead seek membership of the trans-Pacific trade agreement?

With support from Australia and Japan, British participation in the CPTPP, as it is known, is a much more realistic proposition than a US deal, and a more likely symbol of Britain's confident new trade policy. If Biden resumes President Obama's trade policies, it might even provide a less controversial route to freer trade.

Becoming a player in the Pacific, though, raises further questions about Britain's China policy. What is our attitude to Beijing's attempts to dominate sensitive industries? What is our response to its attempts to dominate Asia and beyond? Should we seek a closer relationship with India? How do we balance our justified Sinoscepticism with the reality of China's economic might?

And what is our approach to other hostile states? President Obama's treaty failed to limit nuclear material processed by Iran, and the UN embargo on conventional arms sales to Iran has expired without renewal. Russia continues to act as a menace without ideological cause, and many states appeared tempted by authoritarian leaders and aggression towards neighbours.

Inside the European Union or out, with the United States or without, nobody believes Britain has the power or desire to take on dictatorships or remake the world in its image. But we are a major world economy with significant military and security capabilities. Our foreign policy matters to our own peace and prosperity, and to the future of our friends and allies. We have taken the decision to stride out and into the world: it is time to do so, and with confidence.

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