



Dear Reader,



Welcome to my latest newsletter and update from Holyrood. It has been an exceptionally busy period as we continue to see large volumes of correspondence from constituents about Covid-19 restrictions, and support for business. We have also had a large number of queries about the vaccination programme, with people concerned that they have not been contacted. We now seem to be through the worst of these, but I am receiving more questions about the quarantine hotels issue where Scotland is taking a different path from the rest of the UK. It is very frustrating that announcements are made by the SNP Government without any detail to back them up, causing unnecessary confusion.

Beyond that, a huge amount of my time has been taken up over the past two weeks with the Salmond inquiry, where I sit on the Parliamentary Committee investigating the handling of complaints made against the former First Minister. I have been pushing to have his evidence to the committee published, and have him appear as a witness at the inquiry. It is important that we hear his side of events, and not just those from Nicola Sturgeon. At the heart of this affair are a group of women who made complaints about the behaviour of Alex Salmond, and it is distressing to see them being used as political footballs in the increasingly bloody civil war going on within the SNP.

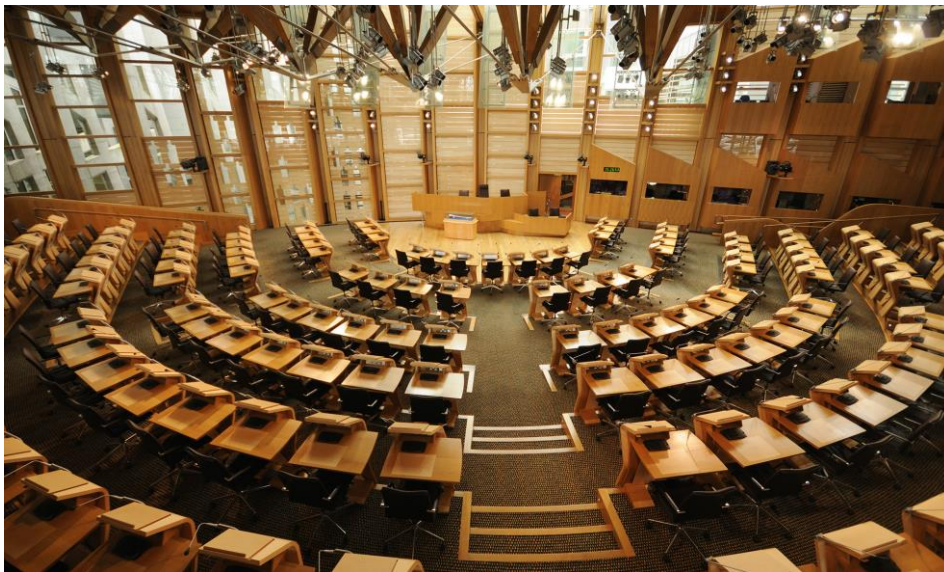
The other concerning issue I have raised is the malicious prosecution of the former administrators of Rangers Football Club. This is a scandal unprecedented in Scottish legal history, which has led to the payment thus far of £24 million in damages to these individuals, and the total loss to the taxpayer could well exceed £100 million. I led the debate at Holyrood last week on the issue, pressing for a full independent judge-led inquiry into the matter, and I am pleased that the Lord Advocate has accepted that this needs to be done. This is just the latest scandal exposing the corruption at the heart of SNP-led Scotland.

As ever, please do get in touch if there are any issues I can help with.

With kind regards,

Murdo

Biggest Scottish budget ever still fails to deliver for business



In many ways, Kate Forbes is in a fortunate position as Scottish Finance Minister. In drawing up her Budget for 2021-22, she has at her disposal more resources than any previous incumbent of her post. Thanks to the UK Treasury, the Scottish Budget for the coming year will be the highest in the history of devolution, putting unprecedented resources at the disposal of the Scottish Government.

Moreover, unlike Finance Ministers across the world, Scotland's does not need to be concerned about a fall in tax revenues. Although non-savings, non-dividend income tax is devolved to the Scottish Government, along with LBTT and landfill tax, the fiscal framework between the UK and Scottish Governments protects the Scottish Budget from any drop in these tax revenues, as long as it is in line with what happens elsewhere in the UK. We are protected from a UK-wide economic shock.

It was appropriate, therefore, and significant, that in the Budget statement we had in Holyrood last week, the word “austerity” did not appear once. Those days are in the past, and the challenge for Kate Forbes was how to spend the additional sums at her disposal, a £1.1 billion increase in the general budget for the coming year, with already an additional £1.3 million to help manage the pandemic.

This comes on top of the unprecedented additional guaranteed sum of £8.6 billion in the current financial year to support the NHS, individuals, and businesses across Scotland, coming from the UK Treasury into the Scottish Government’s budget. And even that sum takes no account of the many billions in direct support that have been provided through the furlough scheme, and other Treasury initiatives.

Despite all these payments, there continue to be concerns about delays in payments to needy businesses and individuals across Scotland who have been crying out for support. Many of the new funds announced back in December are still not actually dispersing funds, and that needs to change rapidly.

Some of what the Finance Secretary proposed in her Budget for the coming year was very welcome. There will be more funding for the NHS, thanks to Barnett consequentials arising from the additional planned £6.3 billion announced for the Health Service south of the Border. The Scottish Government proposal not to increase income tax in the coming year is a sensible move, given that consumer spending, following the easing of restrictions, should be a major driver in future economic growth, and any increases would have held that recovery back.

But, in other respects, the Budget fell short of what is required. Crucially, the headline demand from the business community that the existing 100% rates relief for leisure, hospitality and retail businesses should continue for a further twelve months was not delivered, with only three months of relief being promised.

The Scottish Conservative view was that this was the absolute priority for the Budget for the coming year. At a cost in the region of £700 million, this was easily affordable in the context of the additional £2.4 billion already announced for the overall Budget. But the SNP Government chose to make different choices. It is not surprising that its decision was met with anger in the business community.

Enterprises in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors have had a year of unprecedented difficulty, due to the Covid restrictions put in place, and absolutely no certainty as to when they may be able to reopen. A glance at any high street in Scotland tells its own tale of the devastation there has been on traditional retail over the past twelve months, with household

names disappearing almost by the week. This is a sector that desperately needs more support, and what was promised last week falls far short.

There were other areas in the Budget where cuts hit in a way that will have a negative impact on the economy. There is a reduction of £36 million in the funding of the Scottish National Investment Bank, a cut of £43 million in the budget allowing for “innovation and industries” and a cumulative cut of £67 million in funding for rail infrastructure and major projects. On top of that, the most drastic cut came in the budget for social housing, down from £896 million this year to just £628 million in the next, representing a reduction of 30% in this vital area; a cut described by the housing charity Shelter as “a huge step backwards”.

It also appears that Scotland’s councils are being short-changed, with a revenue rise of less than 1%, at a time when they are facing unprecedented pressures due to Covid, and a substantial drop in income. The Scottish Conservatives have argued for movement to a model of “fair funding for Councils”, in which their funding would increase by at least the same amount as the rise in the Scottish Government’s overall budget, but the SNP have come nowhere close to delivering this. Once again, it is local authorities that are having to shoulder the burden of financial restraint, while spending on pet projects continues to rise.

The SNP are of course a minority Government, and will require the support of at least one other party at Holyrood in order to get their Budget plans passed. We therefore enter a period of negotiation, and all parties will have an eye on the Chancellor’s UK budget planned for the 3rd of March, when announcements will impact on the available cash for spending in Scotland.

In the meantime, it is clear that what has been announced by the SNP, against the backdrop of unprecedented Westminster support, falls far short of what Scottish business and communities actually require. The Scottish Conservatives will certainly be looking to see how this Budget might be improved, to help with the overriding objective of promoting economic recovery and protecting jobs.

Police must investigate Murrell lies to Salmond inquiry



As I write we are still no clearer as to whether Alex Salmond will be giving evidence to the inquiry investigating the Scottish Government's handling of harassment complaints against him. Whilst this is deeply frustrating for Committee members, I do recognise the legal difficulties facing the former First Minister is seeking to tell his side of this whole, sordid story.

Throughout the process of the inquiry, the Committee has been continually frustrated by its inability to publish evidence supporting Mr Salmond's version of events, because of the risk of identifying complainants in his criminal trial – complainants who have, quite rightly, been granted anonymity for life. But this means that the Committee is in danger of only hearing one version of events, that from the First Minister and the Scottish Government, without any countering evidence.

Too often when Government witnesses have come to the Committee their evidence has been incomplete, unconvincing, and has subsequently had to be corrected in writing. On too many occasions the Committee has had to recall witnesses whose evidence was unsatisfactory. On Monday, we heard once again from the Chief Executive of the SNP – and Nicola Sturgeon's husband – Peter Murrell, who was recalled in order to clear up discrepancies in the evidence he had presented in his previous oral session on the 8th of December last year.

All witnesses to the inquiry are obliged to give evidence under oath. This is not simply a piece of political theatre. The effect of administering the oath is that it brings into play the criminal offence contained in Section 44 (1) of the Criminal Law (Consolidation) (Scotland) Act 1995, which states that any person who makes a statement on oath for any purpose, "which he knows to be false or does not believe to be true" is guilty of an offence, which carries a penalty of up to five years in prison.

Such is the seriousness of the matters that the Committee is investigating, it is essential that

those who give evidence to do so accurately and truthfully. When Mr Murrell gave his evidence in December, he was doing so under oath. And yet he managed to contradict both his boss, and wife, the First Minister, and even himself, in the course of that meeting.

When I asked him back in December about the meeting that was held in his family home on the 2nd of April 2018 between the First Minister and Alex Salmond, he told me “I was not at home”. He went on to say of Mr Salmond: “I was not really aware he was coming to the house on [that] occasion”.

But subsequently in the same session, responding to questions from Andy Wightman MSP, Mr Murrell said that he was at home on that day, having arrived from work while the meeting was going on. He also stated that he knew the day before that the meeting was taking place.

Both these sets of statements cannot be true at the same time, and whichever version is correct, it is clear that Mr Murrell gave a false statement to the Committee when he set out one version of what happened. Quite why he did this is unclear; but that is to an extent immaterial – the fact is that he did not tell the truth. Indeed, anyone observing Mr Murrell’s body language during the session would conclude that he was being less than straightforward in his answers – he came across as evasive to the point of being shifty.

I then asked him about the nature of the meeting on 2nd April with Alex Salmond – was this on SNP business, or a Government meeting? Under questioning, Murrell deviated from his statement of the 8th of December that the meeting was one held on Scottish Government business, now claiming that this was “only speculation”. The significance of this point is that Nicola Sturgeon denies that this was a Government meeting, and if it had been then she is guilty of having broken the Ministerial Code for failing to properly declare it as such – a resigning matter for the First Minister.

Whichever version of Mr Murrell’s conflicting evidence is true, he is condemned from his own mouth as having made a false statement under oath, leaving him open to prosecution for breach of Section 44(1) of the 1995 Act. Such is the seriousness of these issues that I have written to the Crown Office asking them to investigate the matter.

The whole experience of the Salmond inquiry Committee is that it has been frustrated all along by a lack of co-operation on the part of both the SNP and the Scottish Government, despite protestations to the contrary by the First Minister. What we are trying to get to the bottom of is why the Scottish Government failed so spectacularly to protect women who made complaints against the former First Minister – women who have still had no resolution to their concerns – and why public money was wasted in defending the judicial review action taken by Alex Salmond.

Nicola Sturgeon has still to give evidence in person, she has said that she welcomes the opportunity to rebut what she calls the “litany of lies” about her and her Government’s conduct. On the basis of the evidence presented this week and previously by her husband, and Party’s Chief Executive, she needs to start closer to home in rooting out those guilty of spreading falsehoods. Her failure to do so will diminish yet further any remaining public confidence in her Government’s handling of this whole sorry affair.

Calling on the SNP Government to clarify the future of A9 dualling.



I have asked the Transport Minister to clarify the future of the £3 billion A9 dualling project between Perth and Inverness.

I have written to Michael Matheson MSP after it had been revealed that the SNP Government has removed both the A9 and A96 dualling schemes from its Strategic Transport Projects Review, despite Transport Scotland officials telling MSPs that the review would consider the future of both schemes.

Instead, market consultation will be undertaken this year to identify the most ‘efficient delivery model and programme.’

The future of the mammoth A9 project is also in doubt, after the First Minister recently conceded that the proposals for both dualling schemes are “ambitious” and couldn’t confirm that the A9 project will be completed by its target date of 2025.

I’ve campaigned to have the road dualled and feel it would be a bitter blow if the much-

needed projects' future is in doubt or will be delayed.

The SNP Government has removed the A9 from its Strategic Transport Projects Review. If this is the case, it would appear that the project faces likely delays and thus would not meet the Scottish Government's pledge to dual the road by 2025.

At present, one of the 11 sections of the A9 dualling scheme has been completed with another to follow shortly. It would be a massive blow for those of us who have campaigned for the dualling of the A9 between Perth and Inverness to be told that the project is either on hold or may face delays in reaching its targeted completion date.

I have written to the Transport Minister as the A9 dualling project is vital for all those who use the route from Perth to Inverness. Local people ran an energetic campaign for years to get this dangerous road upgraded.

Short-term letting regulations and the impact on Scottish tourism



I support the concerns of the Association of Scottish Self-Caterers (ASSC) which wants the Scottish Government to reconsider the proposals contained in the Short-Term Let Control Areas Regulations and Licensing Order. The ASSC is opposed to the planned new regulations and I agree that these proposals will have serious consequences for Scotland's tourism sector.

I too agree with the views of the Association of Scottish Self-Caterers (ASSC), in that they want the Scottish Government to reconsider its proposals contained in the Short-Term Let Control Areas Regulations and Licensing Order.

The Scottish Conservatives voted against the planned Scottish Statutory Instruments (SSIs)

on short-term lets at committee stage and the ASSC is now urging the Scottish Government to think again on the controversial matter.

I understand the strength of feeling against these regulations: nearly half (49%) of all self-employed operators have said they will leave the sector if the new licensing scheme of short-term lets is introduced.

At the meeting of the Local Government and Communities Committee, members heard how a high percentage of correspondence had been sent from individual self-caterers and B & B owners - businesses who were severely affected by the economic impact of Covid and who will now be effected by these regulations.

The regulations will hit rural communities in Perth and Kinross particularly badly. The self-catering sector plays a vital role in the region's economy, helping boost other related businesses in the area, so these proposed regulations have not gone down well at all.

New School for North Muirton/Balhousie



I am delighted with the progress of the planned £14 million North Muirton Primary School in Perth. This will be a state-of-the art learning centre fit for the 21st century.

The plan for the school has now been submitted to Perth and Kinross Council and follows a Passivhaus approach, meaning the new school will be environmentally friendly, as it will use very little energy for heating and cooling.

The new school will replace the former North Muirton and Balhousie schools, both of which

are closing, and will be built in the grounds of North Muirton Primary School in Uist Place, Perth.

It is very encouraging to hear that the plan for the new North Muirton Primary School has been lodged and that the proposal is progressing very well.

This commitment marks an exciting period for the council, as this school should have up to 484 pupils, making it one of the biggest in Perth and Kinross. It demonstrates the council's ambitions and these are to be welcomed.

Self-Catering



This week in Parliament I raised the concerns of self-catering businesses over financial help during the pandemic, with one funding package working out at providing an average of only £400 to each business.

I first raised this with Kate Forbes MSP, the Cabinet Secretary for Finance, at a virtual meeting of Portfolio Questions;

I believe that the funding being allocated to Scotland's self-catering businesses is inadequate and that is why I raised this matter with the Cabinet Secretary for Finance. I asked her when the £7 million support package for self-catering businesses would be allocated.

Given that there are more than 16,000 self-catering businesses in Scotland, £7 million averages around £400 per business, so I also asked the Cabinet Secretary if she felt this was sufficient to compensate a sector that has suffered very badly during the pandemic.

The Cabinet Secretary promised that it was the 'intention' of the SNP Government to roll-out the £7 million funding package, which was announced in November, sometime this month. She also stated that some self-catering businesses may qualify to get funding of up to £3,000 from the Strategic Framework Business Fund this month.

However, we keep hearing about all these SNP Government funding packages, but the reality is that many of them are not paid out in time, leaving struggling self-catering businesses, which play such a major role in the country's economy, in a financially perilous situation and it is really not good enough.

It's all very well saying and promising that these Covid funding packages will be launched, but it's an entirely different thing actually putting this into practice. It is about time the SNP Government gave more thought to the self-catering sector in Scotland.

Job Seekers



The Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) has announced that digital job surgeries will be launched across the UK in a bid to equip those looking for a job with useful skills, and to help more people back to work.

The Job Finding Support service aims to benefit around 150,000 jobseekers across the UK over the next year. This UK Government scheme is very welcome indeed as it will provide many jobseekers in Perth and Kinross with the likes of interview skills to try to help them find jobs during this difficult time.

The scheme also gives advice to those who wish to switch careers and will be run in tandem with the existing support available at jobcentres across the country. As part of the UK Government's Plan for Jobs, the aim will be to identify transferable skills through mock interviews and online sessions, helping job seekers improve their job search techniques. This will be a valuable asset in helping people find employment.

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Murdo's Website



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