

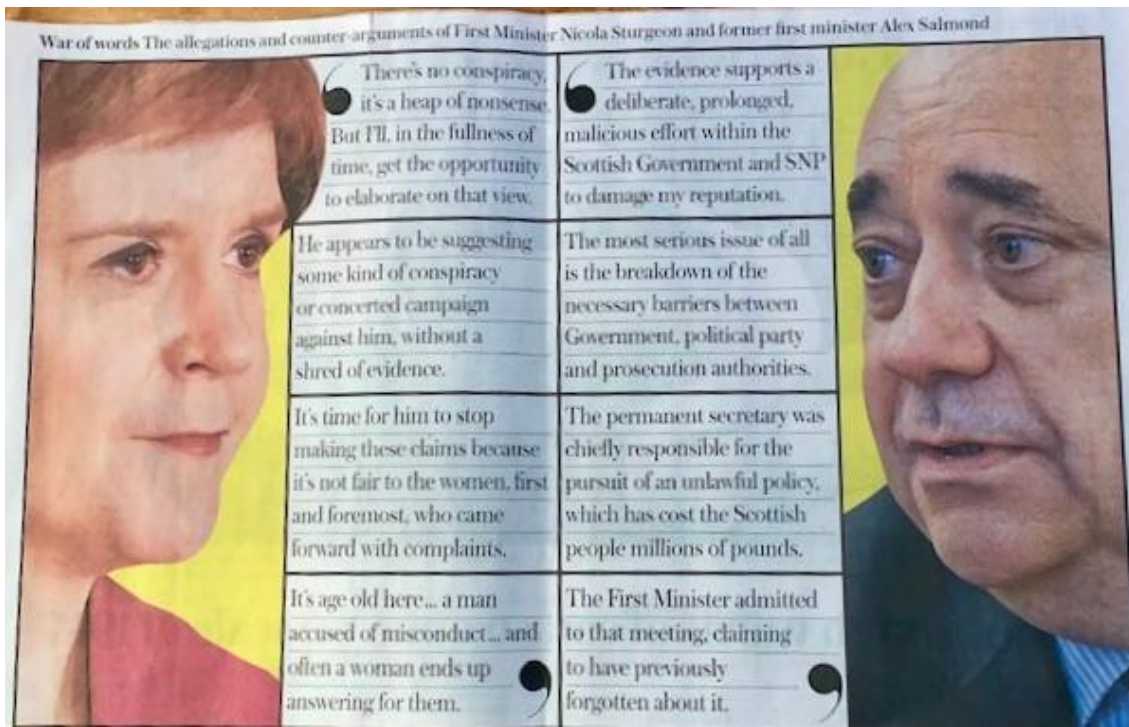


Salmond v Sturgeon



Readers will no doubt have drawn their own conclusions about the events of the last two weeks. It has been a quite extraordinary episode and one which will have repercussions for many years to come, not least of which will be the (much needed) debate about how Holyrood should operate in the years ahead to ensure a scandal like this can never happen again. This has not just been a bitter feud between Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon and an internecine war within the SNP but about the accountability of our supposedly democratic institutions. I can agree with Alex Salmond when he says that the leadership of these institutions has failed but that is not the end of the story. A substantial number of questions arise and three of the most important are about the following:

- The role of the Crown Office (do not forget it is already under investigation for its wrongful convictions of innocent men)
- Whether there should be parliamentary privilege in Holyrood
- Whether the committee system at Holyrood is fit for purpose

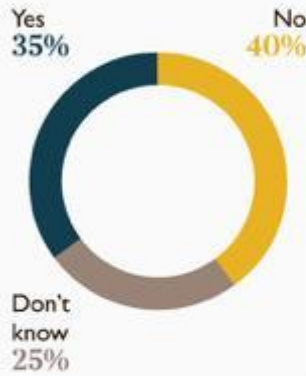


[Link - The Sturgeon Salmond Dossier](#)

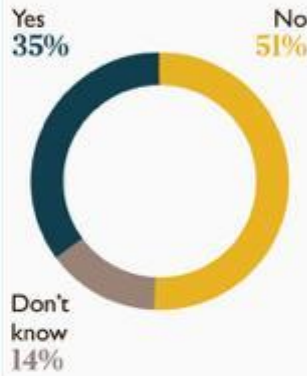
Meanwhile, the opinion polls are starting to move in the right direction but, be in no doubt, there is lots of hard work still to be done before May 6th.

Nicola's nightmare

Has Nicola Sturgeon been entirely honest about the Alex Salmond affair?



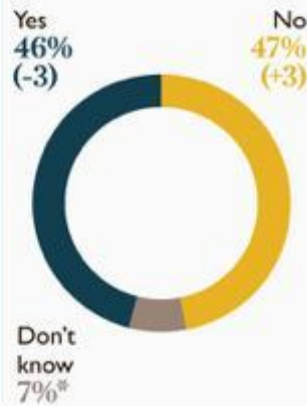
Should she resign now over the matter?



Should she resign if found to have broken the ministerial code?



Should Scotland become independent? (since January)



Has the Scottish government's handling of complaints against Alex Salmond made you more or less likely to vote SNP in May's Scottish election?



How do you plan to vote in May**
Constituency vote (since January)



Regional vote



The Budget



The UK economy has been through a lot recently, with the Coronavirus crisis severely damaging the economy, leaving 700,000 people without a job and reducing the UK total GDP by 10%. Additionally the UK has borrowed more money than at any other time during peacetime, a sum of £355bn.

Despite this damage, the UK economy is set to recover fairly quickly. According to the bank of England the UK Economy could recover to pre-covid levels towards the end of 2021.

Here are some of the key economic and spending commitments made by the Chancellor.

- £1.2bn in funding for the Scottish government, £740m for the Welsh government and £410m for the Northern Ireland executive
- Furlough to be extended until the end of September, the Government to continue paying 80% of employees' wages for hours they cannot work
- Employers to be asked to contribute 10% in July and 20% in August and September
- Economy forecast to rebound in 2021, with predicted annual growth of 4% this year
- Corporation tax on company profits above £250,000 to rise from 19% to 25% in April 2023
- Economy forecast to return to pre-Covid levels by middle of 2022, with growth of 7.3% next year
- Support for the self-employed also to be extended until September
- £20 weekly uplift in Universal Credit worth £1,000 a year to be extended for another six months
- Working Tax Credit claimants will get £500 one-off payment
- Minimum wage to increase to £8.91 an hour from April

- Unemployment expected to peak at 6.5% next year, lower than 11.9% previously predicted
- No changes to rates of income tax, national insurance or VAT
- Tax-free personal allowance to be frozen at £12,570 from April 2021 levels to 2026
- Higher rate income tax threshold to be frozen at £50,270 from April 2021 levels to 2026
- Rate to be kept at 19% for about 1.5 million smaller companies with profits of less than £50,000
- Stamp duty holiday on house purchases in England and Northern Ireland extended to 30 June
- No tax charged on sales of less than £500,000
- Inheritance tax thresholds, pensions life time allowances and annual capital gains tax exemptions to be frozen at 2020-2021 levels until 2025-26
- £1.65bn to support the UK's vaccination rollout and £50m to boost the UK's vaccine testing capability
- £10m to support armed forces veterans with mental health needs
- Tax breaks for firms to "unlock" £20bn worth of business investment
- Firms will be able "deduct" investment costs from tax bills, reducing taxable profits by 130%
- Incentives for firms to take on apprentices to rise to £3,000 and £126m for traineeships
- Lower VAT rate for hospitality firms to be maintained at 5% rate until September
- Interim 12.5% rate will then apply for the following six months
- New visa scheme to help start-ups and rapidly growing tech firms source talent from overseas
- Contactless payment limit will rise to £100 later this year
- All alcohol duties to be frozen for second year running
- No extra tax on spirits, wine, cider or beer
- Fuel duty to be frozen for eleventh consecutive year
- Tobacco duties rose in November but no further rise in this Budget
- New UK Infrastructure Bank to be set up in Leeds
- It will have £12bn in capital, with aim of funding £40bn worth of public and private projects
- £15bn in green bonds, including for retail investors, to help finance the transition to net zero by 2050

Prisoner Voting



In the midst of all this, we debated again the issue about prisoners serving sentences of 12 months or less being permitted to vote in the May elections, just as was the case in the Shetland by-election (without parliament being permitted the necessary scrutiny). The Scottish Conservatives are the only party opposed to prisoners voting (63% of the electorate agree with us) as all the other parties have now argued that voting is an important part of rehabilitation.

I fundamentally disagree with that claim.

Climate Change – Environment Committee Report

After weeks of taking a vast amount of evidence on climate change, the Environment Committee has now produced its final report. It is lengthy but, we hope, very reasoned and well-evidenced and very robust when it comes to making recommendations where we think the Scottish Government has failed. I will be leading for the party on this in the chamber tomorrow but here is a link to the main report.

For me, one of the biggest challenges ahead is how to effect behaviour change without dictating to the public what they can and cannot do as government tries to reach very ambitious targets. There will be lots of debates ahead about how this can happen without punitive action against certain types of consumer behaviour. In particular, I think there is a highly charged debate to be had about how to protect our farmers against some of the extreme actions of those who say we should not be eating red meat.....despite Scotland having some of the highest environmental standards anywhere when it comes to beef and lamb and animal welfare.

[Link - Environment Committee Report](#)

Evidence to the House of Lords Inquiry

Two weeks ago, I was one of the members of the Environment Committee at Holyrood who gave evidence to the House of Lords Inquiry about the effect that Brexit has had on environmental standards and environmental governance. It was a very good session with a good level of engagement with their lordships and better understanding of the mechanisms which need to be put in place between the Westminster Government and the devolved administrations. Indeed, there was a strong sense of purpose in this respect with an acknowledgment that not enough engagement had happened hitherto.



New facility at Perth Royal Infirmary



Last week, there was some very good news.

It has been announced that a state of the art £35 million elective surgery centre will be built at Perth Royal infirmary.

The new facility will be able to carry out a range of very complex surgeries, including; gynaecology, neurosurgery, plastic surgery, breast surgery, urology, dermatology, as well as ear, nose and throat treatments.

This investment in our healthcare services will help to ensure that we continue to receive the very best treatment from our national health service, as well as boosting Perth Royal Infirmary's reputation as a centre for medical excellences.

In the News

THE COURIER & ADVERTISER
Friday, February 26, 2021



MAJOR OPERATION: The Scottish Government is funding a unit at Perth Royal Infirmary dedicated to elective surgery.

£35m 'centre of excellence' plan for elective care

JAMIE BUCHAN

Ambitious plans for a £35 million "centre of excellence" for planned operations at Perth Royal Infirmary have been announced.

The Scottish Government-funded Tayside Elective Care Centre is to meet the demands of the region's growing population.

The specialist complex is likely to offer procedures such as breast surgery, gynaecology, neurosurgery, plastic surgery, urology, dermatology and ear, nose and throat treatments.

An outline business case is being prepared for the new-build facility which will include theatres, treatment rooms and pre and post-surgery beds.

A unit for people who require a short stay after procedures is also planned.

The proposal has been shaped by healthcare planners and surgical teams in virtual workshops.

If all goes to plan, work could begin next year and the first patients could arrive in late 2024.

The Scottish Government has pledged funding as part of a nationwide investment plan.

NHS Tayside chief executive Grant Archibald said: "The planned elective care centre would allow us to carry out hundreds of additional routine operations every year, and make PRI a centre of excellence for planned surgery.

"The development of the Tayside centre would see a significant investment at Perth Royal Infirmary, underlining NHS Tayside's commitment to providing first-class healthcare from the PRI site for the future.

"PRI has the potential to be a recognised centre of excellence and all the teams in the hospital are looking forward to developing the plans further."

Consultant anaesthetist and clinical director for the elective care centre Dr Michael Forster said: "This is such an exciting development because it has the ability to transform the ways in which our patients receive elective care.

"The model is being developed by clinicians and other healthcare professionals, patients and members of the public."

Lorna Wiggins, chief operating officer at NHS Tayside, said it was an opportunity to create capacity over the next 15 to 20 years for elective procedures.

"Complex surgery will be done at Ninewells, PRI will do intermediate and low-risk, and Strathcathro will do low-risk and regional work with NHS Grampian," she said.

Councillor Eric Drysdale (SNP), a non-executive member of the NHS Tayside board, said: "I am delighted to see the careful planning that is going on to make best use of the hospital site, and with construction of these state-of-the-art facilities due to begin next year I can't wait to see this major investment in Perth and Kinross become a reality."

Deputy First Minister John Swinney described the announcement as "hugely positive news", and said it was "further evidence of the Scottish Government's commitment to providing high-quality, accessible healthcare to the people of Perthshire."

It comes after Conservative MSP for Mid-Scotland and Fife Liz Smith launched a campaign in 2018 against what she saw as a "downgrading" of A&E services in Perth.

She said the elective centre announcement was "very welcome news for healthcare across Tayside."

"I hope it will soon be accompanied by further commitments to secure the future of several other key facilities at Perth Royal Infirmary," she added.

Salmomd goes to war with Sturgeon

Former first minister pulls out of today's Holyrood showdown after written submission is withdrawn

By Daniel Sanderson
SCOTTISH CORRESPONDENT

ALEX SALMOND has cancelled his testimony to a Holyrood inquiry after a dossier of claims he made against Nicola Sturgeon was heavily censored following pressure from Scottish prosecutors.

Opposition MSPs said that the Scottish Parliament was left facing a "credibility crisis" after Mr Salmond's written submission was finally published by the legislature on Monday evening, only to be pulled yesterday morning, on the eve of his scheduled appearance.

The Crown Office expressed "grave concerns" over the publication of the evidence, believed to relate to a court order that prevents publication of information likely to lead to the identification of complainants in Mr Salmond's

criminal trial. A redacted version of Mr Salmond's dossier, with around 500 words deleted, was released yesterday afternoon.

However, Mr Salmond's legal team claimed there was no legal basis for the changes and he pulled out of giving evidence last night.

His camp believes the episode adds weight to his belief that a tyrannical Crown Office, the equivalent body to the Crown Prosecution Service in England, is inappropriately meddling in the Holyrood inquiry in an attempt to protect Ms Sturgeon and her allies.

The Crown Office is run by the Lord Advocate, James Wolfe, who under the submission was finally published by the legislature on Monday evening, only to be pulled yesterday morning, on the eve of his scheduled appearance.

In the spotlight Key figures of harassment investigation



Peter Murrell
Nicola Sturgeon's husband and chief executive of the SNP. He gave evidence twice to the committee. He was called back a second time after he was accused of obstructing the disclosure of evidence to obstruct the parliamentary committee, a situation he described as "extraordinary and totally unacceptable".



Leslie Evans
The Scottish Government's permanent secretary and Ms Sturgeon's chief of staff. She was a key player in drawing up the flawed civil service policy used to investigate Mr Salmond, which he successfully challenged in court.



Geoff Aberdeen
Mr Salmond's former chief of staff, he met Ms Sturgeon at her Holyrood office in March 2018. Mr Salmond says the investigation against him was discussed at this meeting, despite Ms Sturgeon telling Holyrood she did not know about it until the following April.



James Wolfe
The Lord Advocate, Mr Wolfe is Scotland's most senior law officer. He has been at the centre of a row over a refusal to publish legal advice received by the Scottish Government about Mr Salmond's judicial review.

depressing day for the reputation of the Scottish Parliament" in her 14 years there. She added: "It is currently falling in its duty to hold government to account and properly serve the people of Scotland. This badly needs fixing."

The parts of Mr Salmond's submission which have now been censored include details of the run-up to a meeting in early April 2018 at Ms Sturgeon's home, which she told Holyrood was when she first became aware he was being investigated by the Civil Service for sexual harassment allegations. Mr Salmond claims she knew about it earlier, and if she is shown to have deliberately misled Holyrood, she would be expected to resign.

The redacted sections of the evidence were being widely shared online last night, after members of the public downloaded the original versions.

However, under Holyrood rules, the evidence could restrict Mr Salmond's testimony, as MSPs are not allowed to ask witnesses about written testimony that is not published, Mr Salmond's lawyer, David McKie, said the "eleventh hour" decision to redact

evidence "has created a significant legal impediment to his oral evidence".

The Scottish Parliament has said it is unable to share with either Mr Salmond or the public the basis of the Crown's concerns.

Mr Salmond has raised the prospect of appearing on Friday instead, subject to legal advice, with the committee to meet today to discuss its next move.

In a letter, Mr McKie added: "It is now clearly impossible for him to attend on Wednesday] in these circumstances, but he remains willing to attend on Friday. He accepts that it is entirely in the interests of the committee."

There are calls for Mr Wolfe to make a statement today to explain his department's interference in the work of a parliamentary committee.

The Holyrood inquiry is investigating the Civil Service probe into sexual harassment complaints against Mr Salmond, which was found to be unlawful in the criminal investigation, which saw him cleared of all charges.

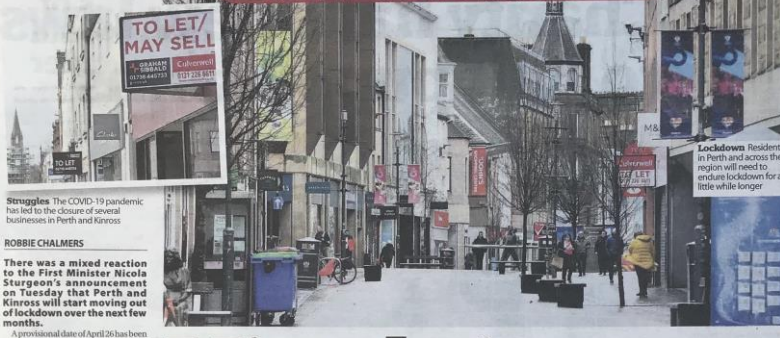
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REACTION TO COVID-19 ROADMAP



Struggles The COVID-19 pandemic has led to the closure of several businesses in Perth and Kinross

ROBBIE CHALMERS

There was a mixed reaction to the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon's announcement on Tuesday that Perth and Kinross will start moving out of lockdown over the next few months.

A provisional date of April 26 has been set for when the partial reopening of many businesses will be permitted, including shops, restaurants, hotels and non-essential shops, as well as services like gyms and hairdressers.

That same week, Scotland will also move back to the levels system which will "allow us to let some parts of the country move faster than others, if the data supports that".

One medical expert welcomed the cautious approach, but many businesses have been left frustrated that they face at least another two months unable to operate.

Ms Sturgeon told parliament on Tuesday that the first phase of the route map started this week (February 22) with the gradual return of schools and nurseries.

The first minister says the second phase, unlikely before March 14, will be a further phased return for university and colleges, the return of non-contact outdoor group sports for 12-17 year olds, and socialising rules will be eased to allow outdoor meetings of four people from two households.

The third phase on April 5, will see the start of home working and schools will fully return. Places of worship will partially return and six people from two households will be allowed to meet outdoors.

There will also be a phased reopening of retail outlets.

The final phase will begin in the region on April 26, with the route map stages to be reviewed every three weeks - and any still subject to change depending on the infection rate.

Speaking at Holyrood on Tuesday Sturgeon said greater details would be given in March.

She added: "We do need to exercise caution and caution and must get the virus to as low a level as we can."

Perth-based respiratory expert professor James Chalmers said the "very much welcomed" cautious approach taken by the Scottish Government in easing restrictions.

The British Lung Foundation chair of respiratory research made the comments after speaking on the BBC's Good Morning Scotland programme this week.

He said: "I think January has been a really difficult period for everyone and

Mixed views as lockdown exit plan is revealed

Business sector frustrated but prof says caution is key

the priority has to be that we don't get back to anything like we have seen in January.

"We have seen modelling released recently over the last couple of weeks that suggest that as schools go back there is a high risk that the R rate goes above one."

"I think it is absolutely right that we aim for that not to happen."

"We have seen in countries like Israel that, despite a very successful vaccine programme, a large epidemic amongst younger people that can still result in a lot of hospital admissions."

Owner of the Cherrybank Inn in Perth Scott Findlay said the region does move back to a tier system, it would still take even more time for his pub to benefit.

He said: "It looks like we go to tier three at the end of April but we can't open the pub like that."

"Because you are just a safe and we had to close in tier three last time. It just



Welcome Prof James Chalmers has praised the approach being taken by the Scottish Government

doesn't work for us.

"You were only allowed to do food only with soft drinks, so that is a killer."

"Tier two was really good because that was food with alcohol and we did

really well out of that."

"But it is impossible in tier two because you are more worried about what the customers are doing."

"[You're] making sure they follow social distancing more about putting money in your till which you shouldn't be."

"But we will see what happens going forward."

Perthshire North MSP and education secretary John Swinney called the route map announcement a "welcome moment" which "acknowledges the strong progress" made in suppressing the virus and rolling out the vaccine.

"With progress on opening up our schools, places of worship and care homes in the next few weeks, we are taking sensible and sustainable steps to enable us all to get back to normal life as soon as it is safely possible", he said.

"Whilst I understand there will be some frustration that we are not moving quicker, the Scottish Government is guided by science and evidence, both of which clearly tell us that we must be cautious in our approach to re-opening."

Mid Scotland and Fife MSP Liz Smith, however, slammed the route map for lacking clarity and accused the first

minister of "back-tracking"

She said: "On Tuesday, it looked as though several year groups would not return until next term but now some back-tracking appears to be going on leaving families confused about the true situation."

"The public has rightly adhered to the rules and places they've considered trust in government ministers."

"That trust is dependent upon accurate information and on hope for the future."

Chief executive of Perthshire Chamber of Commerce, Vicki Unkie, said: "The health of the nation is paramount and we support the efforts of everyone working towards getting the virus under control."

"Many of our members are frustrated that they can't restart their business from an earlier date and they will feel that contingency measures, a great deal of which are ready to be put in place and created with safety in mind, don't seem to have been taken into account."

"It is particularly hard for hospitality, retail and the personal service sector and we hope that these and other areas which are really struggling will receive enhanced financial support."

January has been difficult... and the priority has to be that we don't get back to anything like we have seen in January

My Next Newspaper

Link - My Latest Mail Newsletter

“““

We've known Liz for over 20 years and we couldn't have a better champion for local farmers.

Tommy Clark



“““

I have known Liz Smith through sport in Perth and Kinross for 14 years. No-one is more committed to our young people and their health and well-being.

John Ross



“““

In 2020, the A85 was identified as one of the most dangerous roads in Scotland. That is why improving road safety will continue to be one of my top priorities.

Scottish Conservative & Unionist



“““

Liz has been a customer in this shop for all the time she has been an MSP. She cares deeply about the local community and she knows how to get things done.

Arfan Hussain Methven



“““

Liz has supported our business throughout this challenging time, is always accessible and has an unparalleled knowledge of the rural economy and local affairs; a real champion for local business.

**Emma and Robin Niven
Loch Leven's Larder**



“““

Liz has defended the Perth Royal Infirmary from downgrading since 2001, supporting the "Hands Off PRI" campaign and launching the "Hands Off PRI... for good" campaign in the face of SNP cuts.

ONLY THE SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVES CAN STOP THE SNP'S ATTACK ON OUR LOCAL HEALTH SERVICES.

LIZ SMITH 



Find Out More About Me Here

Perth & Kinross Conservative Website



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