

NICOLA STURGEON'S SPEECH TO SNP CONFERENCE, PERTH, FRIDAY, OCTOBER 18, 2013:

I want to start today by asking you to give a warm conference welcome to our fabulous candidate for the Dunfermline by-election, Shirley-Anne Somerville.

Shirley-Anne will be an outstanding champion for the people of Dunfermline.

She is standing up for the hard won gains of our Scottish government.

To protect them from a Labour Party that describes bus passes for pensioners and free medicine for the sick as a 'something for nothing' culture.

I ask all of you to work as hard as you can to win this election, not just for the SNP, but for Dunfermline and for Scotland.

Delegates,

Let me also congratulate Alistair Carmichael on his appointment as Secretary of State for Scotland.

He's a man I think we can find some common ground with.

He thinks the existence of the Scotland Office is - and I quote - 'indefensible' and so do we.

So, let's vote 'Yes' next year to get rid of it once and for all.

While I am on this subject, let me say a word or two about Michael Moore.

Michael might be a political opponent but he is a decent man who helped deliver the Edinburgh Agreement. We wish him all the best.

Of course, it has been said that Michael's fate was sealed by his performance in the debate he and I had on STV a few months ago. I'm far too modest to comment.

However, I will say this.

If there's going to have to be a new Secretary of State every time the Yes and the No arguments come head to head and Yes wins the day, the No camp better have a very big subs bench.

Michael's problem in that encounter was not his debating skills. It was the substance of his argument. It was the message not the messenger.

Project Fear is intellectually and politically bankrupt. It is an insult to the intelligence of the Scottish people. And as we now see on a regular basis, the more it comes under scrutiny, the more spectacularly it falls apart.

We know that.

And, more to the point, so does the No campaign.

Think about it. If he was at all confident in his argument, wouldn't David Cameron relish a debate with the First Minister?

Instead he is running scared.

The Prime Minister says he will fight against independence with his head, heart, body and soul.

So there you have it, Scotland - it is only David Cameron's guts that are letting him down.

Friends,

In less than 12 months time, we will all make a choice. We will choose between two futures for our country.

Those of us in this hall and many more beyond have already made our choice.

We will vote Yes.

We will do so proudly with our heads and with our hearts.

But we know that many others have yet to decide.

That is our challenge and our opportunity.

So it is to everyone out there, yet to decide and wanting to be convinced, that I make my case today. It can be summed up in three short sentences.

Scotland can be an independent country.

Scotland should be an independent country.

And, for the sake of this and future generations, Scotland must be an independent country.

It is a measure of our progress that, on the question of whether Scotland can afford to be independent, there is now no serious disagreement at all.

We have No campaigners queuing up to tell us that Scotland can be a successful, independent country.

Of course we can.

The fact that they ever questioned it beggars belief - and they should promise never, ever, to do it again.

We are one of the wealthiest countries in the world.

We've generated more tax per head than the UK in each and every one of the last 30 years.

The question is not could Scotland be independent but should Scotland be independent.

And to that question, there is only one answer - the answer is a resounding yes.

I was struck recently by something Vince Cable said - yes, there really is a first time for everything.

I'm sure he didn't mean to do this - but he hit the nail firmly on the head.

He said that:

'there is no reason why a well run Scotland shouldn't do relatively well - but it would depend on future Scottish Governments and how they behave'.

Now, let's put to one side the irony of a senior minister in the current Westminster government - a Liberal Democrat no less - lecturing us on behaviour.

The fact is that in one sentence, Vince Cable has told us exactly why Scotland should be independent.

If our success is down - even in part - to the behaviour of our governments, then surely governments elected by the people of Scotland will always - always - be better than governments rejected by the people of Scotland.

You just need to compare the records of recent Scottish and Westminster governments.

Our Scottish Government has protected free education, frozen the council tax, put 1000 more bobbies on the beat and secured free personal care for the elderly.

We've cut business rates and invested in new schools and hospitals. We've kept our NHS in public hands and we've done everything we can to protect the vulnerable.

And all the while John Swinney has balanced the books in each and every year we have been in government.

Delegates,

That's what good government looks like.

And how has Westminster behaved?

They've taken our oil revenues and slashed our budget.

They've imposed the despicable bedroom tax.

They've widened the gap between rich and poor and sentenced 50,000 more Scottish children to a life of poverty with their welfare cuts.

They've taken money from the disabled to give tax cuts to millionaires.

And they spend tens of billions of pounds on pointless and immoral weapons of mass destruction.

Delegates,

That's how Westminster behaves and we can put a stop to it for good when we say Yes to independence.

You know, it's never been any surprise to me that the Tories want to retain the power to impose their will on Scotland.

But Labour's position is much more puzzling. After all, they are a party that was formed to challenge the status quo in the interests of ordinary working people.

That's what makes the recent statement of Labour's Scottish welfare spokeswoman so utterly baffling.

Jackie Baillie said that, in her view, we could run our own social security system in Scotland, but that we shouldn't.

Just think about that for a moment.

We could be in charge of social security – but we shouldn't be. We should leave it in the hands of the Tories instead.

Now, I don't know about you, but I don't believe for a second that most Labour voters would agree with that.

I suspect that their view, like ours, would be this:

If Scotland could stop the Tories from cutting the income of the lowest paid then we should.

If Scotland could stop the attacks on the disabled then we should.

And if Scotland could abolish the bedroom tax, then we most definitely should.

My message to the Labour leadership is this.

In opposing independence, you are choosing the Westminster establishment over the best interests of the Scottish people.

You're defending the wrong people.

Stop defending the Tories.

And start defending the working people of Scotland.

Delegates,

The case for independence is based on a simple but compelling argument.

It is better for all of us if decisions about Scotland's future are taken by the people who care most about Scotland – the people who live and work here.

Ask yourself this question:

Who will do a better job of creating a fairer and more prosperous Scotland: people who live and work in Scotland or politicians at Westminster?

That is the choice – Scotland or Westminster.

We should be independent to put control of Scotland's future in Scotland's hands.

We must be independent to get Scotland's future out of Westminster's hands.

Tackling fuel poverty is one area where we could do so much better with the powers of independence.

Right now, the Scottish Government invests around £80m a year on energy efficiency schemes to help meet our climate change targets and lower the costs of energy bills.

A further £120m comes from a scheme designed in Westminster, operated through energy companies and paid for by a levy on your gas and electricity bills.

It is a disjointed approach, it doesn't take account of Scottish priorities and it's not as efficient as it could be.

Independence will allow us to tackle fuel poverty much more directly, delivering Scottish solutions to Scottish problems, and ensuring that energy companies always behave in a socially responsible way to protect vulnerable customers.

Delegates,

I can announce today that an SNP government in an independent Scotland will remove the cost of energy saving measures and the warm home discount from energy bills. We will provide that funding from central government resources.

That will mean direct government funding for fuel poverty schemes of at least £200 million per year.

That money will be spent in a fully joined up way, on schemes designed in Scotland to meet Scottish circumstances.

And this won't just allow us to deliver our energy efficiency schemes more effectively. It will also save hard-pressed consumers money.

We estimate that it will cut energy bills by around 5% - or £70 a year.

Not a short term measure - but a real and lasting cut in Scottish energy bills.

Friends,

The case for independence is overwhelming.

But the No campaign says we should stick with the Westminster system because it allows us to spread risks and share burdens.

So let's examine that.

No-one should expect to live a life on benefits.

But if you work hard, pay your taxes, make your contributions and, through no fault of your own, fall on hard times you should expect help in your time of need.

It's called social security.

It's based on the principles of solidarity, togetherness and fairness: paying in and getting something back.

Westminster says that it is reforming our system of social security.

It isn't.

Westminster is destroying our system of social security.

Those paying the penalty are the disabled, young people looking for work, the single-parents and families struggling to feed their children and keep a roof over their heads.

This isn't pooling risks.

It's pulling the rug from the poorest and most vulnerable.

Those who can least afford to take the hit are taking all the risks

That's not sharing – that is shameful.

A food bank based in my constituency - catering for people in just one part of Glasgow - dealt with 1400 referrals in the first six months of this year.

1400 families and individuals in just one part of the city of Glasgow unable to feed themselves.

That makes me deeply sad. But it makes me even more angry.

We are one of the richest countries on this planet.

That there are children going hungry is unacceptable. It is a disgrace.

It doesn't have to be this way.

And with independence, it will not be this way.

Delegates

There is no doubt that people in Scotland are paying a heavy price for Westminster decisions.

We are doing our best to mitigate the worst impact of those decisions.

I am proud of our decision to establish the Scottish Welfare Fund.

I am proud that we have given extra funding to advice agencies at the frontline of the Westminster assault on the poor.

I'm proud that this party - our party - pledged no bedroom tax evictions 6 months before Labour did.

And I'm proud that last month, we announced an extra £20m in this financial year to help those affected by the bedroom tax. That money is enabling councils to top up their discretionary housing payments to the maximum amount that Westminster legislation allows.

I promise you that we will continue to do all that we can to help.

We won't stop demanding that the Tories repeal the bedroom tax - and we demand it again here today.

But, if they refuse to do so, we will not stand by.

I can announce today that we will allocate up to £20m again next year so that we can continue this vital help for those hit by the despicable bedroom tax.

Delegates.

Our actions are softening the impact of Tory policies. But we can't stop these policies in their tracks.

Only independence can do that.

Only independence will allow us to chart a different course.

We've shown already what we can do when we have the power of independent decision-making.

We have been able to protect our NHS from privatisation.

And we've protected students from having to pay for their university education.

But our ability to protect is already causing frustration at Westminster.

And that should sound alarm bells about what might happen in the event of a No vote.

Just a couple of weeks ago, we had Labour's Westminster Shadow Health Secretary calling for consistent health policies across England, Scotland and Wales.

In other words, not more devolution, but less devolution.

Delegates,

A UK-wide approach to health would be the worst thing that could ever happen to the Scottish NHS.

So in case the message hasn't got through, let me say it again, loudly and clearly.

Westminster privatisation of the NHS is not wanted in Scotland.

Scotland's national health service is staying in public hands.

Delegates.

The point I am making is this - Westminster doesn't like Scotland taking a different approach to public services.

They don't like the universal principle.

For Labour and Tories alike a system of progressive taxation, where people make a contribution and receive a benefit in return is a 'something for nothing' culture.

Consistency of policies across the UK is the new mantra.

That's why Labour has set-up its cuts commission.

So be under no illusion. If we don't vote Yes, Westminster will turn the screw.

And the limitations of devolution will be exposed for all to see.

The Scottish Parliament has the power to distribute money.

But Westminster decides the budget.

And we know this much: there are Westminster MPs in all the UK parties itching to abolish the Barnett formula and cut Scotland's share of spending.

So, I say this to everyone yet to make up their mind. Consider carefully the arguments for a Yes vote. Subject them to scrutiny and ask the tough questions.

But do not ever let anyone pull the wool over your eyes about the consequences of a No vote.

They are clear and they are real.

Scotland's social security system will be dismantled

Scotland's public services and universal benefits will be under threat

Scotland's budget will be cut.

Delegates,

Scotland can't afford a No vote.

If we are to protect, and build upon, the progress of devolution, then we must vote Yes.

Conference,

The risks of a No vote are real.

But it is the opportunities of Yes that will be at the heart of our campaign.

Next month the Scottish Government will publish our White Paper on independence.

The White Paper will be Scotland's detailed guide to independence.

It will make the positive case. It will explain the process by which we will become independent and describe how our newly independent country will work.

It will set out the gains of independence for you, your family and for your community.

And it will answer all your questions.

Delegates,

The White Paper is the platform upon which we will build majority support for independence.

The White Paper will have jobs and living standards at its heart.

A fair day's pay for a fair day's work is all that most people want.

And it shouldn't be too much to ask.

But it's not the experience of hundreds of thousands of hard working people across Scotland.

Over four hundred thousand people right now are working for less than the living wage.

That is nearly 1 in 5 of the Scottish workforce.

The majority of these low paid workers are women.

Delegates,

We can do better than this. We must do better than this.

The UK has one of the lowest pay economies in the OECD.

More of the people living in poverty today are in work than out of it.

And this isn't a recent phenomenon.

Since the mid 1990's – all through the Blair and Brown years – there has been a steady rise in the numbers of people in work but living in poverty.

Delegates,

Labour should be ashamed of that record.

Our SNP government already has a good record in paying the living wage to all of our own employees and to those who work in the NHS.

But there is more that can be done now in both the public and the private sectors.

Today I can announce that the government will fund the Poverty Alliance to deliver a Living Wage Accreditation Scheme to promote the living wage and increase the number of private companies that pay it.

We intend to make decent pay the norm, not the exception, in our rich country.

Delegates,

Our government will use every power at our disposal to protect jobs.

But if we want to support job creation to the maximum, provide a truly competitive environment that encourages investment and brings high quality jobs to our country, an environment that ensures that effort and industry are fairly rewarded, then be in no doubt - we need the powers of an independent country.

Friends,

People often ask what an independent Scotland will look like, in five years, ten years, twenty years.

The answer is that it will look the way the Scottish people want it to.

It will be the country we choose to build.

That is the point of independence – to shape our country, to chart our future and to make decisions for ourselves.

The vote in 2014 is not a vote for or against the SNP.

It is a vote for or against the power to take decisions in Scotland.

With a Yes vote next September, Scotland will become an independent country in 2016.

All the parties - the SNP, Labour, the Greens, the Tories and others - will then make their offers to the

electorate.

The big difference between then and now is this:

The government of Scotland will be the government elected by Scotland.

That is the power of independence.

If that government is an SNP government we will get to work on the job of building that better country.

An SNP government will use the powers of independence to bring Scotland's postal service - our Royal Mail - back into public hands.

An SNP government will use the powers of independence to abolish the bedroom tax.

An SNP government will use the powers of independence to protect the state pension and make sure it keeps pace with the cost of living.

And an SNP government will use the powers of independence to remove Trident weapons of mass destruction from Scotland once and for all.

Conference,

These are the policy decisions we can make. Each and every one of them offers a good reason to vote Yes.

But the opportunity of independence is not just about individual policies.

It is about much, much more than that.

It is about the chance to take responsibility and build a better society.

Next year, we have a once in a generation opportunity to chart a new course for our country. To take our own future, and that of our children and grandchildren, into our own hands.

To all those yet to decide, I say this.

Cast your mind forward and imagine how you will feel on the 19th September.

What outcome will make you feel more proud? What outcome will make you more hopeful for the future?

Will it be knowing that nothing has changed? That we had a precious opportunity to do things differently but, with the eyes of the world upon us, we opted to leave them as they are?

Or will it be knowing that we have taken the chance to build a better country and a new relationship with our friends across these islands.

That we have chosen hope over fear.

That we have believed in ourselves.

You know, there are no certainties anywhere or for anyone in this fast-moving world of ours.

But it is always - always - better to be in the driving seat of your own destiny than to let others decide the course for you.

Friends,

The choice we have been given is one of two futures.

Scotland's future in Westminster's hands.

Or Scotland's future in Scotland's hands.

That's what's at stake.

Not for our party.

But for our country.

For those who work hard to get on in life but who are held back by the gulf between rich and poor.

For those with talent and potential who deserve the opportunity to succeed.

For the vulnerable and disabled who are paying the price of things as they are.

And for the children who will get the chance to grow up in a country where independence is not something to be argued over - but something to be celebrated and cherished.

Think about those two futures.

And then resolve to do everything you can to ensure that on 18 September next year the people of our country say a resounding Yes to an independent Scotland.