

Scottish Labour Party Conference

Dundee

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Leader of the Scottish Labour Party

Speech to the Conference

Comrades and friends, it is wonderful to be back in Dundee, a city which has always been at the heart of the Labour movement in Scotland.

From Mary Brooksbank to Margaret Irwin, from Alexander Wilkie to the Timex workers whose heroic struggle and bitter defeat exactly a quarter of a century ago we mark this year and which we should never forget.

Well, it's been a while conference, since we've seen a map of Scotland on our television screens covered in so much red as we did during the storm forecasts last week.

It's little wonder the Tories took one look and cancelled their conference.

Well, let me say at the very start this afternoon that my ambition, our aim and our task is to paint that map of Scotland red again at the next election.

But the Beast from the East served to remind us, that in the teeth of adversity Scotland is a country which puts community first, where people look out for their neighbours, for their friends and

for their families.

This is my first conference as your leader, and I want to begin by thanking Kezia for her leadership of this party and her energy in the most turbulent of political times. Kezia, thank you.

I said, when I stood, that now is the time for real change. Real change for Scotland and real change for Scottish Labour.

This conference is a springboard for that change and I want to thank you all for the contributions that you are making here this weekend.

Because no one single person on their own can bring about the scale of transformational change that the people of Scotland need

We are the Labour Party, so we do it together, and we will stand or fall together as well

So let us unite, not simply for the sake of unity, but unite for the sake of a renewed unity of purpose.

And for the sake of all those people in all of those communities who don't just need a strong Scottish Labour opposition but who need a strong Scottish Labour government.

And we need to be united more than ever precisely because our society is more deeply divided than ever.

Over forty per cent of our old age pensioners are living in fuel poverty this winter, forced to choose between heating and eating.

Many of us in this hall have relatives and neighbours making that decision every morning this winter

And I know, from the twenty years I spent as the organiser for the GMB's retired members in Scotland the harsh reality of what living from week to week in pensioner poverty really means.

Some of those members are here at this conference today like Jimmy Miller, a stalwart of the union and now a North Ayrshire Labour councillor.

But sadly, some are not like Betty Warden, a Labour party member in Springburn who passed away just a few days ago.

We will miss her but the best way to honour Betty's memory is to keep on fighting for the causes that she believed in.

So I pledge today that I will keep on fighting for the eradication once and for all of pensioner poverty for dignity in retirement and a new deal for Scotland's pensioners.

And I can give you this cast iron guarantee as well that this Labour Party will fight every inch of the way to oppose any move by the SNP to cut our concessionary travel scheme for the over sixties.
But it is not just the elderly who need Labour's support.

The number of children growing up in poverty in Scotland is rising.

And the real scandal is that seventy per cent of them live in households where at least one adult is in work.

And all of this poverty comes in the midst of plenty .

In Scotland today, the richest one per cent own more personal wealth than the whole of the poorest fifty per cent put together.

This should not only anger us as socialists, it should offend our sense of morality as a nation.

Because I tell you that the rich are only so rich because the poor are so poor. And it should jolt us into action because it is a sign of just how urgently we need to change the imbalance of wealth and the imbalance of power in our economy.

So this really is no time to tinker around the edges. I tell you that we cannot simply manage our way out of the great social and economic ills which confront us any more than we can simply manage our way as a party back into power.

So this afternoon, I want to leave you with this message: that our party's mission under my leadership is not simply to secure a fairer distribution of wealth from the existing economic system, it is to fundamentally change the existing economic system.

Because I tell you, in all sincerity, that is the only way to end the stark inequality of wealth and power that confronts us in Scotland today .

So our mission, the Scottish Labour mission, is to face the future and bring about real change.

Real change to that system and its decaying values.

Real change to that imbalance of power.

And a real change in the priorities of Scottish politics.

And a new found sense of urgency. To give the people of Scotland hope out of despair.

Conference, it is just over a hundred days since I was elected leader of the Scottish Labour Party.

I have used that time to pursue our goal of real and radical change in favour of the many.

My very first act was to join the workers at the gates of BiFab in Methil .

It was a statement of intent about how we will act as a party and how we will act as a movement.

Because if the Scottish Labour Party can't support a group of workers in the fight of their lives for their jobs then what is our purpose?

In my first week I also stood shoulder to shoulder with firefighters who were lobbying Parliament to stop cuts to our Fire and Rescue Services.

I have campaigned on the high streets of town centres with Unite to oppose Royal Bank of Scotland closures.

And I joined the UCU picket lines to back university workers in their struggle to defend their pensions.

Because while we may challenge injustice in the Parliament, we will always challenge it on Scotland's streets and in our workplaces too.

Because that is what we do and that is what I have done throughout my working life.

And there is one person in particular whose struggle I want to share with you.

The very first employment tribunal case pursued as a union organiser was an equal pay claim.

Yvonne Trotter was the Head Chef at Rosyth Dockyard and we discovered that she was being paid two pounds an hour less than her male predecessor.

We won her case. Yvonne then had to make a sex discrimination claim because, in pursuing equal pay she was victimised and made redundant.

We won her case. Incredibly conference, not long afterwards I had to represent Yvonne in another equal pay claim.

Because in her next job she discovered that a male chef doing the same job was paid a higher hourly rate.

That male chef was her husband Dave.

We won her case again. A few weeks ago I met up with Yvonne for the first time in twenty years.

Thankfully, this time she had no equal pay claims.

But she did tell me she was a WASPI woman. One of hundreds of thousands of women losing out financially because of unfair pension changes brought in by the Tories.

Yet she said to me, in a quieter moment that “in the end the fight goes out of you”...

But my message to Yvonne is the same now as it was the first time we met and it is the same message I send out to all of those struggling –

Do not give up

I will not give up.

We in this movement will never give up fighting for you.

Because this Labour movement, and this Labour Party was established to take on those fights, to fight injustice and to win equality.

And that's what, under my leadership, with renewed vitality and conviction we will do again. Because our job is to give people confidence to raise hope and to overcome fear that is what this movement does and that is what this party will do.

Equality should be at the heart of everything we do and all that we stand for .

But there have been times when we have failed to live up to that simple but enduring value, and as a result we have let people down.

So there are changes we need to make to our party. Black, Asian and minority ethnic members face a constant battle against discrimination and racism in their daily lives.

They should not have to face it in our party.

So I am delighted that conference has passed the interim report on how we will support BAME members, how we will not only have zero

tolerance towards any harassment or any discrimination but how we will promote equality and diversity in our party.

When it comes to eradicating inequality, Scottish Labour will listen to all voices –and we will act: educating our members and mobilising our movement .

Conference,

We have an old fight on our hands: social ills we thought had been dealt with once and for all are back, thanks to Tory austerity.

The weather of the last few weeks has been atrocious but for those of us in this hall we have, I expect, been lucky enough to lock our front doors and stay warm.

But imagine not having that option, imagine having to sleep rough on the streets the streets of this city, or any other.

On a hard, frozen pavement or in a shop doorway. Too many people don't have to imagine it.

Rough sleeping is all too real.

But this party knows that it doesn't have to be this way.

It was Labour in the Scottish Parliament that introduced world-beating homelessness legislation.

But through the years of Tory austerity and brutal welfare cuts and the years of SNP complacency rough sleeping is on the rise again.

So tackling the scandal of homelessness, of rough sleeping, of soaring rents, of too few affordable homes lies at the very heart of our plans to change Scotland.

I have already secured a commitment from the Scottish government to review not only the scale of rough sleeping in Scotland but to consider a total ban on winter evictions.

And I can announce today that in Parliament we have begun the work to introduce a new Rent Restrictions Act - a Mary Barbour law - to protect tenants and to control rents exactly as I pledged to do in my leadership campaign.

The Mary Barbour law will regulate the private rented sector to ensure that no one, no-one, is forced to rent a home that pushes them into poverty or falls below the standards needed to protect their physical and mental health and well-being.

I passionately believe a home is a basic fundamental human right.

That's why a future Scottish Labour government would ensure access to a safe, secure, habitable, and affordable home.

It is a government's obligation to the people to guarantee that everyone can exercise this right to live in security, peace, and dignity.

But almost one-in-ten households in Scotland are currently waiting for public housing.

In this city alone over seven thousand households are on the waiting list.

When Scottish Labour was last in power we built 61,000 homes for rent in Scotland and when we gain power again, we will build again.

Not only by funding local Housing Associations not only by stimulating housing co-operatives which we will do, but by restoring powers to local councils as well.

So let me be clear, under a future Scottish Labour government we will start building council houses again.

Building more public homes and tackling rip-off rents and agency fees will create better homes for bringing up our children.

It will reduce the cost-pressures of housing and it will provide a supply of sheltered housing too which will be in growing demand with our ageing population.

And of course by building more homes we can boost local economies and generate local jobs.

But we need it to be funded in an open and transparent way .

Pension funds seek low risk investments with a reasonable return, making them perfect for long-term finance projects.

Scottish local government pension funds hold forty two billion pounds worth of assets.

So investment in public housing is a logical next step.

What is needed then is the political will to secure the economic transformation that Scotland needs.

And we are not prepared to wait until 2021 for real change. We are taking the fight to the SNP now.

We proposed an anti-austerity budget which would halt cuts to lifeline services, invest in the NHS, tackle child poverty, by raising child benefit and fully fund a pay rise for public sector workers including those in local government.

Because, I tell you this, public sector workers should stop paying the price of a crisis they did not create.

And this would be paid for by a social responsibility allowance , a tourist tax, a land value tax on vacant land and by raising the top rate of income tax so that those with the broadest shoulders bear the biggest burden.

Because there is nothing wrong with the old socialist principle of from each according to their means to each according to their need .

Labour knows that local government is at the coal-face of delivery providing education, maintaining and building housing , investing in and keeping our communities safe.

They can also lead the way in the fight against poverty and inequality too. But they are starved of their resources, stripped of their powers and forced to shed their staff by this SNP government.

In education alone we have seen the cuts, in teacher numbers, in support staff numbers and we have seen the rise of parents being asked to buy textbooks for their children even to fill teacher vacancies themselves.

We still have an abiding educational attainment gap which refuses to narrow while the curriculum does just that, closing down our children's options.

Labour would offer real change in our education service.

Scotland needs a year-round, all-age, flexible child care system.

It needs local councils to be able to protect education spending. It needs school teachers to feel respected and valued.

It needs a college system which offers fully funded bursaries and financially supports students instead of one which cuts student places in a move which, let me say is anti-working class.

And it needs a university system which is based on access according to merit where there is no “privilege gap” and where the poorest students no longer rack up the highest debts.

Our three emergency services are also under attack from austerity.

Our Scottish fire and rescue service must have the resources it needs to keep people safe.

And protecting people and keeping them safe should also be the priority for our police service.

And Scottish Labour is clear – the role of the Scottish Ambulance Service as the appropriate responders to all medical emergency calls must be maintained.

We have seen in just these last few weeks how much we depend on our emergency services and once again how much we depend on our National Health Service.

Yet in the last year we have seen, GP shortages rise, Nursing vacancies rocket, and ward closures forced on local communities.

That is why the Scottish budget we proposed this year would have meant an extra one hundred million pounds for our NHS.

And we know that represents money well invested. Invested in the doctors, the nurses the expert health staff, the porters, the cleaners, and the catering staff who battled through snow and storms to make sure they were there to care for us when we needed them.

And who do the same day in day out night in night out.

So Scottish Labour thanks you all. But words of appreciation are not enough.

And that is why we will fight to make sure that the pay rise our NHS workers deserve is paid up in full and we will fight to make sure it is not paid for by more cuts to services.

And that is why a Scottish Labour government would legislate to cap the profits that private agencies make in our health service investing instead to attract and retain staff, benefiting patients as well as the workforce.

That is why we have set up a workforce commission led by Anas Sarwar to find the long term solutions to the workforce crisis in our NHS.

On behalf of this conference, I want to thank Anas for all his hard work.

Conference,

It is not just public sector wages which have stagnated and stalled it is Scotland's whole economy which is growing three times slower than the rest of the UK.

It is a low wage and a low output economy, built on the quicksand of precarious work, zero hour contracts, agency working ,and umbrella companies.

The SNP is complacent. They tell us the foundations of Scotland's economy remain strong and short time fixed term contract working is what people want - but let me tell you about someone I know.

Over the last 12 months.

He has worked for Doosan Babcock on the INEOS contract in Grangemouth and then was made redundant.

He then worked for an umbrella company laying pipes for Scottish Water.

He was paid off when the contract ended last spring.

He finished last year working again for Doosan Babcock on the waste to energy contract at Levensat in Lanarkshire; but he was paid off from there last month.

During the year when he was out of work between contracts, he'd sometimes drive a taxi, scrimping and saving to make ends meet.

His wife works but they have a mortgage to pay, two kids one still at school so right now he's back on the taxis.

He's a hard worker, he wants to work and he wants secure work. I know him because he's my brother in law.

His life is all too typical of what work is like for too many people in Tory Britain and SNP Scotland in 2018.

That is why I am absolutely determined to bring about real change to end this insecurity in the labour market.

And it is why I am angry about the callousness of the Tories and the complacency of the SNP.

Our economy needs less market and more planning, less short termism and more long term sustainable development.

These issues have been with us for too long already but they assume a new urgency with Brexit.

The Scottish Parliament's primary purpose should always have been the economic transformation of Scotland.

Tackling the underlying weaknesses of the Scottish economy not least the massive growth in overseas ownership of our industry which is now a third of our economy.

But given Brexit, there must be a redoubled, and a renewed, sense of urgency .

A new determination that we begin this economic transformation now .

Comrades,

I have said that debate is a healthy part of our tradition.

There are still too many countries in the world where there is no freedom of speech, no democracy, where trade unions are banned, where a conference like this would be illegal.

These freedoms had to be fought for so we should not treat them lightly. And so, by the same token if there is a referendum which we have agreed to, on terms and on a franchise, which we have agreed to, then we have to accept the result of that referendum.

Because we are not just socialists we are democratic socialists.

And I have to say this, that if it comes down to a choice between the sovereignty of the market and the sovereignty of the people I choose the sovereignty of the people every time.

But right now we have on the one hand a Tory Government which wants to turn its back on the Single Market of the European Union and an SNP Government on the other which wants to turn

its back on the Single Market of the UK which is worth four times as much to Scotland as the EU.

It is only the Labour Party which is proposing barrier free access to both. That is the position which Keir Starmer and Jeremy Corbyn have set out.

Labour's six tests must be at the heart of any deal put to the UK Parliament.

And Jeremy Corbyn is right that we must have a new customs union with our European neighbours.

So wherever you stand don't look back in anger. Let's keep our options open to get the best deal that we can in the future.

And let us not forget that it is with the shambolic Tory party that the blame for Brexit lies.

Their chaotic and confused approach to negotiations is putting our country, our economy and even our devolution settlement in jeopardy.

Because, here in Scotland the SNP cynically uses the Tory shambles as a way to sow more division in its never-ending quest for independence.

It is only the Labour Party which stands as a bulwark against Scottish and British nationalism.

Conference let me be clear if the Brexit deal is not right, then Labour will vote down the deal. And then lets get rid of this rotten Tory government.

That is why we must be united . Because the United Kingdom needs a Labour government .

It needs Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister. And Scotland needs a Labour government And a Labour First Minister. And let me tell you conference,

I am up for the job.

But we will not wait for the next election or indeed a referendum to make the changes Scotland needs.

The Parliament gives us the democratic power to bring about change now. And by bringing forward our own bills we are already using that power.

Just look at the work of Claudia Beamish. Her bill to ban onshore fracking in Scotland forced the Scottish Government to do just that.

Protecting the air we breathe, keeping safe the water we drink and ensuring that we leave our planet in a better condition for future generations.

Look at the work of James Kelly, his bill to repeal the unworkable Football Act will be passed next week.

Look at the work of Daniel Johnson, whose Bill will protect shop workers and bar staff from violence and abuse when they simply do their jobs.

And look at the work of Monica Lennon who just two days ago lodged her Bill to end period poverty in Scotland.

Just four Members Bills which will radically improve people's lives. And there is more.

In the aftermath of the tragedy of the Grenfell fire David Stewart has launched a Bill to ensure all new social housing is fitted with sprinklers.

Mark Griffin has already secured government money to help parents who face stressful costs when visiting their premature babies in hospital.

Jenny Marra has already announced her intention to bring forward a Bill to end the fees in this city's hospital car parks

Neil Bibby's Bill makes life fairer for tied pub tenants, protects jobs in Scotland's pub and breweries and gives greater choice to consumers aka the nation's beer drinkers.

Neil Findlay aims to prevent MSPs from holding second jobs when they are supposed to be serving the people of Scotland

So to those who say the Labour Party cannot make real change while in opposition.

I say – you are wrong

But think how much more we could do if we were in government

Conference, Scottish Labour is also the only party which has developed an industrial strategy for Scotland. And we don't just say that we would spend a bit more on infrastructure or offer a few more subsidies to business or that we would be a better management team at running the Scottish economy than the SNP although I am sure we would.

We have a radical strategy which puts full employment at its heart, ending the decade of SNP complacency about real unemployment and ending insecure work.

It recommends giving workers a statutory, preferential right to buy an enterprise when it is up for sale or facing closure.

Because, why on earth shouldn't those people who create the wealth own the wealth they create?

It supports the development of cooperatives and would see the creation of a National Energy Company.

And in our new policy for industry we want to show people that through a new approach to long term investment by unleashing innovation and the ingenuity of working people we can herald a renaissance in our manufacturing industries.

And we will seek out new ways, modern forms of democratic planning in the economy.

Our strategy will ensure that we stop once and for all giving millions of pounds of public money in subsidies to exploitative tax-avoiding companies like Amazon down the road in Dunfermline.

And that we stop awarding billions of pounds of public procurement contracts to companies which don't pay a living wage which use zero hour contracts and which blacklist workers.

So we meet in Dundee and we applaud the redevelopment of the waterfront but we condemn the use of a blacklisting company to do it.

We are the Labour Party: the party of work and the party of the trade unions.

We are here to change society to its very economic foundations. Our vision has always been to build an economy which works for the people rather than simply people working for the economy.

And that is why we know that automation will be a test for us all.

But in the end this is not a new challenge but an old one.

It is the challenge of making sure that working people benefit from this fourth industrial revolution and are not the casualties of it.

Which is why we need to be pro-active not just reactive to economic crises.

Scottish Labour is prepared to intervene and to plan and not simply rely on voluntary business pledges and the invisible hand of the market.

We believe that trade unions have a major task not just in defending their members but playing a part in planning the economy.

Scottish Labour is the party of jobs and industry.

We are the party of co-operative development and public ownership because we believe in an economy as well as a political system which is of the people, by the people and for the people .

The mess we have seen with the collapse of Carillion confirms that private contractors carrying out public contracts exposes too big a risk to our public services.

This should never ever be allowed to happen again.

So let me assure you that our starting point in Scottish Labour is to ensure our public services are there to serve the Scottish public not the balance sheets of financiers.

Which is why I am pleased to report that we will take Scotland's train services back into public ownership at the earliest opportunity.

De-privatising public services and developing public ownership is a radical change.

But it will be a Labour change and a popular change .

Conference, I will tell you why it is vital we need to make this radical change.

There are grassroots campaigns in this city and across Tayside trying to improve mental health services.

Today, I spoke to Phil Welsh

He and his wife Lesley have set up a website dedicated to the memory of their son Lee, who tragically took his own life on the 8th of August last year.

Phil told me that Lee endured poor mental health on and off for over nine years.

Dundee has a high level of suicides and it is the biggest killer of young men in the city.

Which is why to

day I am backing the campaign for an urgent review of mental health services here in Tayside.

Mental health services need to be put on a stable financial footing and front-loaded investment is needed in prevention services.

Put simply, more funding is needed. And here is a suggestion.

Why don't we simply call a halt to the racking up of extortionate PFI debts which push local services to the brink?

Here in Tayside the thirteen million pounds that is spent on the two private finance contracts for mental health facilities is simply not delivering for those people who need them.

The Carseview contract for example has another nine years to run and is estimated to cost three million pounds each year.

The contract for mental health facilities at the Murray Royal and Stracathro hospitals is expected to pay out three hundred million pounds over the next twenty five years.

From speaking to campaigners, they agree that there's no time to lose. This is a matter of life or death.

So I pledge today , under my leadership Scottish Labour will go into the next Holyrood election committed to signing no new private finance deals.

At a time when the public sector is facing so many budget cuts it is unjust that private companies through PFI and the SNP's NPD and Hubco schemes are raking off millions in profits.

These contracts do not provide value for money. So, we will go further and also explore how to bring back in-house existing contracts and we will develop alternative public-sector models for funding saving the public money and improving services and working conditions.

The same goes for our social care services. While our NHS has helped people to live longer we have seen a growing reliance on private providers caring for our elderly.

But our vision to transform social care to meet the needs of the future means we cannot rely on the market. Already private providers are withdrawing and that is why we now need real change in social care including the socialisation of its ownership because that way lies greater accountability and the better planning of these services.

The care home sector in Scotland is also in crisis significant reforms are now needed.

Demand is rising, but because of SNP cuts to council budgets the system is close to collapse.

In my view in most cases local councils themselves may well be the best provider for this care.

So I want to make clear today, Scottish Labour's policy going forward will not just be to support the principle of integrated health and social care – it will be to put that principle into practice.

So we will prioritise bringing care contracts back in to our local authorities – and for the avoidance of doubt we will bring care staff back into local council employment too.

Our vision for Scotland's care services means we will invest in making social care a profession with a career path and a decent wage to recognise the value of this critical work and we will make it a public service with a real future underpinned by our commitment to build the caring society.

So the Labour Party's job is to set out new horizons to awaken ideas and to raise consciences to give people hope again.

And as we look to the future the fight ahead to win power demands our maximum unity and solidarity.

Let us be sustained, by the vision of the society which we are determined to achieve.

We want to remove the fear of poverty for good, tackle persistent unemployment by building a full employment economy, tackle climate change humanity's greatest challenge, provide decent homes, end

rough sleeping, give dignity in retirement to the old opportunities and new horizons to the young and bring about a renaissance in public ownership.

We want to set out before the people of Scotland the biggest programme of social and economic reform in the history of the Scottish Parliament.

So let us rededicate ourselves to our cause of democratic socialism, let us do it with a mixture of old idealism and new energy.

Let us gather our strength. Let us reinvigorate our own supporters and bring new members into our Party.

By leading with conviction, putting forward our principles and our faith.

By being distinctively Labour.

Confident Labour .

Principled Labour.

Reawakening hope again.

And let us be proud to say that in our time, in our generation we helped build a better future by being true to our radical roots.

Because if we do that, working together nothing and no one can stop us.