

November 2020 NEWSLETTER



Linlithgow & East Falkirk Constituency

Welcome

...to my last Newsletter of 2020. The coronavirus lockdown restrictions introduced on the 20th of November saw West Lothian as one of eleven local authority areas moved to Level 4 of Scotland's Strategic Framework; published in October to set out the strategic approach to suppress the virus to the lowest level. The restrictions are tough, especially as days are colder & nights longer, but necessary given Scotland had remained at the same level out of lockdown since July. Sadly, since my last update there's been a significant rise in average daily death rates, so please stick to the rules and stay safe over Christmas.

Westminster Update

Trade Deals and the NHS

On the 16th of November I was called to lead a Westminster Hall debate on an e-petition relating to concerns about our NHS being part of any trade deal reached between the UK Government (UKG) and the United States of America. Nearly 112,000 people signed this petition, reflecting the extent of these concerns. The cost of drugs to the NHS is already growing much faster than inflation, driving deficits across the service; and US Government statements have suggested it "intends to negotiate for US pharmaceutical companies to charge higher prices for medicines sold to the NHS as part of any UK-US Free Trade Agreement". I argued that allowing big business and pharmaceutical companies to behave as they see fit will drive costs for new drugs well beyond the NHS ability to afford them, which threatens our health, safety and national security. The UKG has said that, along with the NHS, the price the NHS pays for drugs, and the services the NHS provides would not be on the table when negotiating trade deals. But, if that is true, why did Tory MPs vote, overwhelmingly, against an Amendment to the Trade Bill that would have enshrined in law the protection for our NHS, and other vital public services, that this petition called for? You can read the full debate here: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-11-16/debates/27CDCCFD-787C-4696-94ED-54C1498577D1/details>



Fuel Poverty and Energy Price caps

I'm pleased to report that my long-delayed Backbench Business Debate "Fuel Poverty and Energy Price Caps" finally took place on the 19th of November. However, I was disappointed that more MPs didn't attend on behalf of their constituents - only one Labour MP out of 200 and zero Tories - and that Wales and Northern Ireland were not represented to reflect the magnitude of this problem across the UK. You will likely know that fuel poverty is a complex issue; impacted by energy efficiency, household income and energy costs. So, although fuel poverty is devolved, it is affected by Westminster policies and the Scottish Government is trying to tackle it with one hand tied behind its back. If the UKG won't give Scotland full powers over Social Security and Energy Policy this side of our independence then it must address the fundamental failures within these areas that are exacerbating fuel poverty, which the economic consequences of Covid-19 and the impending hard Brexit look set to worsen. At the very least we need UK ministers to introduce a "New Emergency Coronavirus Energy Grant", with a freeze on prices and a six month reprieve on utilities being cut off. We certainly need more than what the UKG is doing, with a temporary extension of the price cap to next year. More of the same just doesn't cut it. I called on the Minister to replace the price cap with a scheme that will ensure all customers are protected from energy inefficiency and the high tariffs imposed by energy providers that target the least wealthy in our society. In response the Minister committed "...to meet individual Members on a face-to-face basis to discuss these really important issues." Therefore, I am taking forward cross-party work with the fuel poverty charity, National Energy Action, to best coordinate this, as even one home caught in the misery of fuel poverty is one too many. You can read the full debate here: <https://hansard.parliament.uk/Commons/2020-11-19/debates/8D2BA2D9-F761-451C-A22A-1A63045B9484/details>



Active in the constituency

Scotland's future in Scotland's hands

Since the December 2019 general election, 14 polls relating to Scottish independence have been carried out. The most recent is the 11th in a row that has "Yes" leading while, of the remaining three, one was a dead heat and the other two had 'No' leading by just 1%. This makes support for independence the most sustained for a record time in the polls.

It is, therefore, clear that a majority support for independence is no longer a trend, but the settled will of the people of Scotland.

This most recent poll found that a widespread dislike of Boris Johnson is one of the key factors fuelling the rising support for independence – with 79% of swing voters in Scotland agreeing that "Boris Johnson is not the leader I want to have for my country". Other persuasive

arguments included a hard Brexit – which Scotland firmly rejected in 2016 and three elections thereafter – as well as Tory austerity and the UKG's poor handling of the COVID pandemic. The poll also shows that the UKG's opposition to Scotland's right to choose is proving increasingly unpopular, with 53% of swing voters opposing Westminster's anti-democratic moves to block another referendum and only 28% in support.

Now, of course, the Tories are threatening to "undo" devolution, which is bolstering the argument that independence is the only

**14TH POLL IN A ROW
SHOWS A LEAD
FOR INDEPENDENCE**

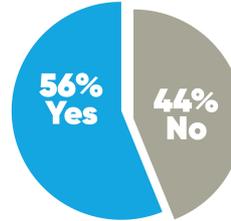
YES

way to protect and strengthen Scotland's Parliament. With Johnson saying "devolution has been a disaster north of the border" and that it was "Tony Blair's biggest mistake" the mask has well and truly slipped. Reiterated in Parliament last week by the Rees-Mogg statement "Blairite constitutional tinkering has weakened our Parliament ... I hope that this government finds a effective way of restoring our constitution to its proper form" demonstrates what the Tories really think.

So, in the run-up to the crucial 2021 Holyrood election, the negative campaigning has already started. However, as Ross Greer of the Scottish Greens says, this proves "clearer than we ever could why independence is both essential and urgently needed." Even former Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale says a referendum is coming; and 59% of Labour voters believe that an independence

referendum should be the matter for the Scottish Parliament, not Westminster. It is becoming apparent that Johnson's desperate attempts to deny Scotland's right to decide our own future are completely unsustainable.

This is about the whole of Scotland - all of us - determining the future we want as a country. Yet, some are still unconvinced and it is incumbent upon each one of us to persuade with respect and move forward together. It's time for independence. We must make it happen. #IndyRef2 #Yes



Source: Panelbase/ScottGoesPop
Excluding Don't Knows, 5-11th November.

Links between Parliament and the constituency

While in Westminster, leading the two debates mentioned above, I took the opportunity to present Public Petitions on behalf of my constituents on three very important issues, which I fully support:

Recognition of sub postmasters

Post offices are a lifeline for communities and, according to the National Federation of SubPostmasters, support as many as 300,000 vulnerable people. Yet, if the Post Office subsidy is not maintained they may not be able to continue. This petition called on the UKG to ensure the Post Office subsidy is extended beyond 2021 and to recognise the integral role they play in their communities.

Retirement age of prison officers

I have raised this issue numerous times. These petitioners want the retirement age of prison officers lowered to 60, as 68 is too old to cope with the physical and mental challenges of the role on a daily basis, and for the same consideration as police officers who can retire at 60 despite having periodic contact with the same type of offenders. Prison officers deserve better treatment from the UKG.

Support for the self-employed during COVID-19

It's a scandal that the Chancellor thinks it's okay to exclude the self-employed, freelancers, creatives and others from financial support during the COVID-19 crisis. The treatment of those who have been excluded is deplorable, with Rishi Sunak dismissing this group and continually refusing help. Sunak won't even meet with cross-party MPs to discuss the matter! This petition asked for additional measures to be introduced so that no one falls through the gaps.



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