

Leader's Speech on 26th January

1. Introduction

Ladies and Gentlemen, it is an absolute pleasure to be here today. And thank you all for coming to my inaugural speech as leader of Reform UK in Scotland.

It's wonderful to see so many Reform members from across Scotland. And what a result on Thursday in Glenrothes, a second-place finish for Reform UK from a standing start, beating Labour into a distant third! We have all the momentum in Fife and across hard-working communities the length and breadth of this country.

Make no mistake, the Holyrood Election in May is now a straight choice between Reform and the SNP.

So many people ask me to explain who and what is Reform UK in Scotland. I reply, to truly understand Reform in Scotland, you need to meet the members!

Meaning, Reform is not all about Nigel Farage (although clearly there's a reason why he's the frontrunner to be our next Prime Minister!) but, just as important, are the members he leads.

Today, Reform UK has 270,000 members making us the largest political party in the UK and, in Scotland, we have 12,500 members and rising every day.

What an astonishing grass roots campaign we are building here in Scotland. A movement of ordinary, decent, hard-working Scots who have come together because they are thoroughly fed up with mid-table mediocrity at Holyrood and who share an alternative vision of a happy and prosperous Scotland, back where we belong at the top of the table.

A vision of Scotland where those people who do the right thing every day in their community get rewarded, not punished. A country where:

- Work is respected and well paid; where
- Welfare is a safety net not a lifestyle choice; where
- The NHS delivers better outcomes for patients; where
- Education is restored to world-class; where
- Housing is affordable for workers; where
- Communities are cohesive and prosperous; and where
- Our Economy creates wealth for all

2. 25 Year Review of Devolution

We were promised a country just like that by the New Labour architects of devolution, Tony Blair and Donald Dewar, when Holyrood was established in 1999. But for all their lofty rhetoric, what has Holyrood actually delivered over the last 25 years?

A country where:

- Our political class have created a welfare economy which does not create wealth; where
- Work does not always pay more than welfare; where
- 93% of Scots think the NHS needs significant reform; where
- Our once world famous Scottish education has gone from outstanding to average; where
- There is a chronic shortage of affordable housing; where
- Uncontrolled, low-skilled immigration has destabilised our communities; and where
- Our GDP per head is 25% below Sweden.

Why this underperformance?

Contrary to SNP rhetoric, it has not been caused by a shortage of money. In 1999, the state spent £34bn in Scotland; today that figure is £118bn. That equates to a compound annual growth rate of 5%, so no austerity there!

As a percentage of GDP, state spending has increased from 43% in 1999 to 55% today meaning that costs have consistently outpaced revenues. (By comparison, New Zealand spends only 42% with similar GDP per head)

The reality is that modern, professional politicians have never worked in business, never had to generate their own revenues, never had to use their own money to make payroll on a Friday. Most professional politicians are financially illiterate and yet make spending decisions worth billions of pounds of taxpayers money. And the one thing they all pay lip service to, but never deliver on, is economic growth.

3. An Exciting Opportunity

But it doesn't need to be this way.

Scotland has all the natural resources to be the most successful part of the United Kingdom. Starting with our very own silver bullet; our people. 300 years ago, it was the Scots who created the modern world through the enlightenment of our scientists, our inventors, our philosophers, our writers, our economists and our entrepreneurs.

The steam engine, the television, the telephone, the pneumatic tyre, penicillin, the MRI scanner, tarmac, the radar, the flush toilet and the ATM were not created by "the state". They were created by people, innovative Scots; which is why Scotland used to lead the world!

Today, Scotland still possesses incredible people in business, in science and technology, in education and in health. But we are not unleashing that raw talent because the state has become overbearing in our lives instead of liberating our natural innovation and creativity.

We need to unleash Scotland's great potential by incentivising our own brilliant people to solve our own modern problems rather than sitting back and expecting "the state" to do that for us.

This is what devolution in the last 25 years has taught us so emphatically; that politicians just spending more of our money does not solve modern problems.

So, this is an exciting opportunity to elect a new Holyrood in May which, for the first time ever, will be focused on how to grow the economy. As the new Leader of Reform Scotland, I am incredibly ambitious for our country and I will be setting out a positive vision of how Scotland can lead the world once again!

Meanwhile, Reform UK will be standing 73 new candidates covering every single constituency in Scotland. And what an impressive bunch they are: doctors, lawyers, economists, entrepreneurs, teachers, nurses, small business owners, farmers, civil servants, local councilors etc. experts from all walks of life and from every part of Scotland. Not professional politicians, instead passionate Scots who are dismayed by our country after 18 years of SNP.

4. Three Key Policy Areas

Today, I want to focus on the three key areas that Scots have identified as being the most important to their daily lives being; the Economy, the NHS and Immigration.

5. A New Economy

A vibrant economy will be at the heart of Reform's plan for prosperity. Fundamentally, this new economy is not "the state"; it's simply comprised of our very own hard working and creative citizens. If we incentivise our own people, this new economy will create wealth for all and raise considerably more tax revenues to reduce our deficit.

GERS figures confirm that today Scotland collects tax revenues of £90bn giving us a £30bn short-fall against our total spend of £120bn. This £30bn deficit is funded by the Block Grant from UK Treasury supported by Sterling and it is four times the deficit allowed by the EU, which is why John Swinney's plan for leaving the UK to join Europe is pie-in-the-sky.

John Swinney is being disingenuous with the country and disrespectful to his own supporters by promising to deliver Independence with the reality of this deficit conveniently ignored. If he really was serious about Independence, he would have spent the last 18 years reducing this deficit in preparation for separation, instead his Scotland is earning the equivalent of £750 per week and spending £1,000 per week.

No-one here would run their household or business budget on such a basis, fortunately the UK Treasury backed by Sterling is content to fund this deficit on a friends and family basis, but international bond markets would not be so kind with an Independent Scotland. Borrowing costs would be extortionate without a creditable currency and international investors would demand swinging austerity to balance the books.

In Scotland, we are protected from bond markets because we borrow through the UK Treasury which gives us access to affordable borrowing thanks to the credibility of Sterling built up over 300 years. Surely, it should be a matter of pride and of principle for us all to unite around the timeless Scottish concept that we don't spend more than we earn and that we will bring that deficit down to a more respectable level?

Being dispassionate, we could either cut our spending or to grow our revenue. But we cannot be dispassionate about cutting spending because that would create too much hardship in our communities, especially for those in more deprived areas. So, my policy agenda will minimise spending cuts and instead focus on growing that £90bn of tax revenue. And this is where we deploy that silver bullet; we unleash the potential of Scotland by incentivising our very own productive people.

In Scotland, we have 10 clusters of economic excellence where we are genuinely world-class (energy, financial services, advanced manufacturing, food & drink, tourism & hospitality, creative industries, life sciences, agriculture, fisheries and marine). It's time now to focus our resources – people, education, skills and training – around these 10 clusters to get both our young people and our adults toolled up for this new, modern economy where they can earn well above the minimum wage and create prosperity for themselves, their families and their communities.

But for these sectors to thrive, the politicians need to create a trading environment which is unashamedly pro-business and pro-enterprise. This would be a first for Holyrood!

I spend a lot of my time speaking with business owners of SMEs in Scotland. Right now, they feel they are hamsters on a wheel, “busy fools” as one owner said to me, because the harder they work to drive revenue, the government then takes it all away from them through punitive business rates, excessive energy costs, ridiculous environmental levies, escalating labour costs, overly-complicated planning restrictions and unwarranted regulation.

This must stop now. In both Holyrood and in Westminster, Reform UK will pull all these levers and remove this red-tape nonsense.

And to show immediate intent, a new Reform government in Holyrood will cut income tax. Workers and owners in Scotland are paying too much tax. Those with the broadest shoulders are now shrugging their shoulders and saying, “what’s the point?” Of expanding my business, of hiring more staff, of working longer hours, of launching new products? What’s the point indeed? The pendulum at Holyrood has swung too far from work to welfare and Reform Scotland will build a new economy which rewards work first and creates prosperity for all.

So, I can announce today that Reform will immediately restore income tax bands in Scotland to align with the three UK bands and then implement a cut of 1p below each band with an objective of being 3p below each band in the first five years of a Reform UK government in Scotland.

This immediate alignment will cost £1.2bn and every 1p cut thereafter will cost £850m each. Therefore, the immediate cost will be £2bn which will be paid for by re-allocation of the £9bn currently spent on highly dubious environmental protection, economic development and 132 unaccountable quangos.

6. NHS Scotland

Turning now to health, let me make one thing crystal clear:

Under Reform Scotland, the NHS in Scotland will remain free at the point of need and will be fully funded by general taxation.

However, it does needs reform; a recent poll commissioned by Enlighten revealed that 93% of Scots think that NHS Scotland needs significant change and reform.

That is because health outcomes in Scotland are deteriorating relative to other countries with similar healthcare budgets. Again, this is not about a shortage of money, because we spend £20bn on health in Scotland and that figure has increased by 6% per annum over the last 25 years.

Indeed, the Auditor General for Scotland said recently that despite more money and more staff, the NHS in Scotland remains “financially unsustainable”

Now, I’m not going to stand here and pretend there is a quick fix because, if so, that would have already been implemented. But at the very least, the NHS needs to be reviewed with fresh eyes. The SNP have run the NHS for 18 years and they’ve given up any serious attempt to improve it. Right now, they are splashing more cash as a sticking paster to get through this election campaign.

The SNP are tired and all out of any ideas or solutions for this critical part of our national life, indeed they are now accused of covering up serious mis-management at QEH. Surely, it’s time now for the SNP to step aside and allow Reform UK to focus on improving patient outcomes.

And how do we do this? By trusting our brilliant medics and nursing professionals, by removing management duplication, by improving staff retention and morale, and by creating new pathways of care. With only one objective: to improve outcomes for patients. Health systems around the world are adapting to elderly populations and a new suite of health conditions. With a defined population and world-class medics, Scotland is in a unique position to once again lead the world in modern healthcare.

7. Immigration

The third most salient policy area of concern to Scots is immigration. This issue is relatively new to Scotland because, historically, we had a lower proportionate share of immigration than UK and then, in the last five years, we suddenly had a higher proportionate share of the unskilled Boris-Wave owing to changing housing priorities in Glasgow.

Our political opponents accuse us of fabricating this grievance because it suits them to pretend that this isn't really a problem; crisis, what crisis? Some want to label it as purely an English phenomenon, others take any opportunity to smear those of us who raise legitimate concerns.

We totally reject that narrative, because the authenticity of Reform UK is to speak the truth on any issue. The sad reality is that immigration is now a serious issue here in Scotland and it cannot simply be wished away, swept under the carpet and ignored.

Personally, I look at this issue through two lenses; first, through the Christian faith and second, through the economic reality.

Scottish values have been shaped fundamentally by Christian faith because our country has been largely Christian since St Columba arrived on our shores 14 hundred years ago. We have just celebrated Christmas where the Christian message is one of peace and goodwill to all men. The modern bible was commissioned by the Scots King James VI and it teaches us to love our neighbour, meanwhile the parable of the Good Samaritan instructs us to cross the road to help a stranger in need no matter their colour or creed. L&G, we have a long tradition of Christian charity in Scotland.

However, charity begins at home and, right now, we have a good number of Scots in our local communities who need our help finding work, getting a good home, securing a decent education for their children and dealing with their own health issues. Make no mistake, Scots have always been welcoming to immigrants and we have a good track record of community cohesion and integration. But right now, especially in this cost of living scenario, we need to prioritise our own people over strangers. Instead, from Inverness to Falkirk, local people are witnessing priority of services, opportunity and safety being given to strangers, and that is not fair.

Which brings me to the economic reality. Our population in Scotland is 5.5m of whom 3.6m are of working age. Of that cohort, 2.6m are active in work and 1m are economically inactive. Exempting students, carers, early retirees and the long-term disabled leaves half-a-million Scots of working age locked out of aspiration and prosperity. Such wasted talent! This is a mark of national shame, and it needs to be addressed by Holyrood as a matter of national urgency. Work is a key component of the Scottish DNA. We need to help our neighbours back onto the pathway to work.

The opportunities coming in the New Economy and our 10 exciting clusters of excellence will require labour ranging from highly skilled to entry level jobs. We must give priority on these entry level jobs to our own economically inactive and encourage them to improve their skillset to allow them access to higher wages. Giving all these entry level jobs to immigrants has the consequence of locking our own people out of aspiration and prosperity, and that is not fair.

Reform UK is absolutely committed to solving this conundrum because the happiness of our people depends upon it. Welfare should always provide a safety net for our less fortunate neighbours, but it should also provide a pathway back to work. The optimum form of welfare will always be a good job and work will always remain the best route out of poverty. For those who have fallen out of work with no easy pathway back, I remain ambitious for you, so please work with me so we can get you back to a life of fulfillment through work.

8. The Constitution

Turning now to the Constitution, this issue of Scottish Independence has dominated Holyrood to the detriment of the people of Scotland who would prefer their elected politicians to focus on the day job and give them better outcomes in the economy, health, education, housing and infrastructure.

The two parties most devoted to the Constitution are the SNP and the Tories who are in a co-dependent relationship in this doom loop. The SNP, because it allows them to continually deflect blame to London when in reality they do have all the powers required to make Scotland prosperous and fair. And for the Tories, because their one and only single policy of the last 10 years is to say no forever to another referendum.

Either way, the Scottish people have no appetite for the rancour and division of another referendum any time soon.

Rational nationalists agree that now is not the time because Scotland has not been responsibly prepared for separation by the SNP neither financially nor defensively. Moreover, purist nationalists have rumbled the SNP false independence narrative within the EU and question why they would ever swap the “yoke” of London for Brussels? Furthermore, they are appalled at how the SNP have not protected local communities and women and girls in Scotland in preference to pursuing woke policies on gender and immigration.

I believe that moderate unionists (no longer represented by the Tories) and rational nationalists (no longer represented by the SNP) can find common ground and unite around one single ambition; to make Scotland the most successful and the most fair country in the world.

My appeal to all Scots is to unite around a common vision of prosperity and justice for all **now** and deal with the constitution **later**. Reform UK is the only party in Scotland with that vision!

I believe it will take 10 years (two Holyrood terms) to turbo-charge the economy in Scotland which in turn will unleash the innovation required to deliver significant improvements to our health service, our education, our housing and our infrastructure. That is why I say no to the distraction of another referendum for at least another 10 years, without ruling one out in the future. Even Ruth Davidson agrees that would be unconstitutional!

If the moment ever arrives to ask this question again, can we please all agree that should only happen when we have put ourselves into a strong enough position to make that decision based on strength and not just emotion?

9. Personal

So L&G, make no mistake, this Election is now a two-horse race between Reform UK and the SNP. I urge you to vote Reform UK to get a break from IndyRef2 and get a new government in Holyrood whose sole purpose will be to grow the economy to create prosperity for all and to protect all our citizens fairly.

Which leaves one last question; a question I've been asked many times since I was announced as Leader of Reform in Scotland eleven days ago. Why are you doing this?

Well, let me tell you:

I was born in modest circumstances in a tenement at 33 Bank Street in Greenock. My father was a building surveyor and my mother was a nurse, neither attended university but completed their training at night school.

I was educated for free at Ardgowan Primary and Greenock Academy and was bright enough to read Law at Edinburgh University on a full grant. I left University with £2,000 in debt and, in 1987, I found work in the City of London like so many other Scots who were denied opportunities at home.

There I grafted, sometimes doing 100 hour weeks, but I prospered through hard work and Scottish nous. Over a 40-year career, I've paid many £ millions in tax. I say that not to boast. But to illustrate what one wee ambitious lad from Greenock was able to pay back when he arrived in London with £2,000 in debt, one suitcase, a world-class Scottish education and a good old fashioned Scottish work ethic.

I took on the brightest and the best in The City, and I wanted to win!

And then, of course, there is the boat...

You see, we had no money for extras in my house growing up. Every morning, I would open my curtains and look out on the Clyde in all her glory and the yachts were so alluring and yet so inaccessible; I couldn't afford to sail, not even as crew. Until six years ago, aged 55, when I found myself a coach and, applying the same Scottish work ethic, I learned how to helm a racing yacht. Now I race on "Braveheart" in the Solent, trying to beat the English once again in their own backyard. What a joy!

When I was asked about this recently, I referred the media to one of my favourite songs "Dignity" by Deacon Blue. It's the story of a man who works for the Council who keeps a secret that he saves up his money to buy a dinghy and he calls her Dignity.

The song says "they'll ask me how I got her? I'll say I saved my money, they'll say isn't she pretty, this ship called Dignity."

I love this song not just for the words and music but also for the message of working hard and saving up to make your dreams come true.

It finishes:

"I'm thinking about Home

"I'm thinking about Faith

"I'm think about Work

"And a place in the winter for Dignity

I think these lyrics encapsulate the essence of Scotland. I want everyone in Scotland to work, to save up their money, and to follow their dreams.

To have dignity at home, in faith and in work.

10. Conclusion

So, yes you're right, I don't need to be turning my life upside down to stand for Holyrood. As Nigel Farage said last week, I could be luxuriating on the Red Benches in the House of Lords. Or alternatively, I could be "sailing up the west coast, through villages and towns, I'll be on my holidays, they'll be doing the rounds...."

But I'm not. I'm here, doing the rounds because I care passionately about Scotland, because I believe we are massively under performing as a country, and because I believe it's my duty to give back to Scotland because she gave so much to me.

I shall combine my business acumen together with my ministerial experience to offer new ideas and solutions which, combined with hard graft and talented colleagues, will allow us to turn around this under-performance and unleash Scotland's potential for the benefit of all Scots.

That is what I am offering up to the Scottish people, and they will give their verdict on 7th May.

Which is why I'll be spending the next 15 weeks campaigning for Reform UK throughout the whole of Scotland to ensure that we communicate this positive message of change, of hope and of prosperity.

John Swinney is tired, all out of ideas, and well past his sell-by date. To use an old Scots phrase, it's time to give the SNP their jotters.

Malcolm Offord is new and fresh and passionate about Scotland.
It's time to change the sheriff

**THAT'S WHY SCOTLAND NEEDS REFORM AND REFORM IS
HERE IN SCOTLAND**

It is time to lead the world again!

Thank You