

## SNP DEPUTE LEADER NICOLA STURGEON'S ADDRESS TO SPRING CONFERENCE

Speaking in her address to the SNP's Spring conference at Heriot-Watt University conference centre in Edinburgh, SNP Depute Leader Nicola Sturgeon said:

"Fellow nationalists,

It's hard to believe that it is almost one year since our historic election victory.

A victory that propelled the SNP into government and set Scotland on a new path.

Like all of you I was out on the stump a year ago today.

Knocking doors; shaking hands. Not quite daring to believe that victory was within our reach; but deep down inside growing ever more confident that we might, just might, be on the brink of something really special.

And delegates, hasn't it been just great?

It has been a truly amazing and unforgettable year.

I had wanted to stand here before you today and tell you that as a party we were doing as well now as we were this time last year.

That would have been no mean feat a year into minority government.

But, delegates, it wouldn't be true.

Because all of the polls tell the same story.

That the SNP is more popular today than we were a year ago.

And Alex Salmond is a First Minister that Scotland can be proud of.

Now, don't worry, I'm not about to indulge in a bout of triumphalism or self-congratulation.

We in the SNP know better than anyone that the trust of the Scottish people has to be won. It has to be earned and re-earned. We will never take it for granted.

But these poll figures show what can be achieved by a government that has ambition, a sense of direction, and a determination to stand up for the Scottish interest.

Delegates, we are popular today because we are providing the strong national leadership that Scotland has lacked for far too long.

We have replaced the timidity of the Labour-Liberal coalition with a can-do spirit that says our size as a country is no barrier to our success.

We fight Scotland's corner. We have – and let me tell you we will continue – to stand up to the Westminster bullies.

We speak out on the big issues that matter.

We've said no to nuclear power.

And we will say no to a new generation of Trident nuclear missiles on the Clyde.

Most importantly of all, we have made changes that make a real difference to the lives of individuals and their families across Scotland.

As people grow more anxious about the state of the economy, as they struggle with the impact of the credit crunch and the rising cost of fuel and food, it is our government that is trying to ease the strain.

After ten years of sky-high hikes from Labour, it is our government that has frozen the council tax.

They said we couldn't do it; then they said we wouldn't do it.

But John Swinney did do it and hard working families across Scotland are feeling the benefit.

And let there be no doubt, we will go on to abolish the unfair council tax and introduce a fair tax, a local income tax based on ability to pay.

Delegates, we have scrapped tuition fees already. Thanks to Fiona Hyslop our students are more than £2,000 better off and Scotland – the birthplace of free, comprehensive education – once again has an education system based on the ability to learn, not on the ability to pay.

What an achievement less than one year into government.

And, delegates, it is just one of many achievements.

I can't begin to tell you how proud I was, earlier this month, as Health Secretary, to take the first step on the road to abolishing prescription charges.

On April 1, as prescription charges in England increased by 25p, they came down in Scotland by £1.85.

And they'll keep coming down until they are abolished altogether within the lifetime of this parliament.

Health care free at the point of need.

A principle Labour abandoned

A principle that is now safe in SNP hands.

Delegates, I'm sure I'm not the only one who marvelled at Wendy Alexander's ability to keep a straight face when she said at her party conference that Labour was a socialist party.

It certainly gave us a laugh but as jokes go it was a pretty sick one.

Labour's idea of fair taxation is retaining the unfair council tax and doubling the rate of income tax for the lowest paid people in the country.

Gordon Brown's axing of the 10p tax rate has left more than half a million Scottish households worse off. Anyone earning less than £17,000 a year will pay more in tax.

Delegates, that's not socialist. That is scandalous.

Delegates, the actions of our government are saving people money. Easing the pressure at a time when the government in London is tightening the screw.

But we are doing so much more than that.

After years of hot air from Labour on fighting crime, it is Kenny MacAskill who is putting 1000 more police on Scotland's streets.

Action, not words, from an SNP government determined to make people safer in their own homes and communities.

And our fisherman and our farmers – for too long seen as expendable by uninterested London governments – they now know that in Richard Lochhead they have a true champion on their side.

Delegates, we have every right to feel proud of our achievements, of our performance in government.

But we must not – ever – rest on our laurels.

For, fellow nationalists, we are the party of progress in Scotland.

Standing up for all of those who want to get on and ensuring that we are there for those who need a helping hand.

As we move into our second year of government, it is vital that we take on the big challenges that face our country.

There's no doubt that one of the biggest of these challenges is housing.

In the last ten years, homelessness in Scotland has been on the rise.

Years of neglect from Labour means that we have a massive job to do to tackle the housing shortage in Scotland.

That's why we've set a new target of 35,000 new houses to be built each year by the middle of the next decade.

Make no mistake, that's an ambitious goal. To meet it we'll need all hands on deck.

Housing associations and private developers will continue to make the biggest contribution.

But local councils have a big role to play too.

Wendy Alexander recently invoked the memory of the great John Wheatley, the first Labour housing minister.

She claimed to be the inheritor of his legacy.

But delegates, nothing – absolutely nothing - could be further from the truth.

Council house building all but disappeared under Labour.

In the last parliament, councils built just six new houses.

That's right: six new council houses in four years.

Delegates, I don't know about you, but I think that's a brand of socialism that John Wheatley simply wouldn't recognise.

Labour failed to deliver, but under our government things are already getting better.

I can report to you today that since May last year, councils have started work on 250 new council houses.

More progress with the SNP in one year than Labour managed in four.

But we must go further.

That is why we will introduce new incentives to councils to build new homes across Scotland.

Delegates, I can announce today an incentive package of £25 million over the next three years to kick-start a new generation of council house building in Scotland.

Of course, there's little point investing in new council houses just for them to be sold off under the right to buy.

So let me confirm that our government will introduce legislation to end the right to buy for new build social houses.

That proposal has received massive support across the country and from housing professionals - from everyone, in fact, except Labour and the Tories.

A few weeks ago in Parliament, Labour backed a Tory motion to block our reform of the right to buy.

So there we have it: Scottish Labour – the last desperate defenders of Thatcher's policies.

Scottish Labour: out of touch, out of time and destined to stay out of office.

Delegates, giving everyone access to a decent house they can afford is a key priority.

It will take investment, commitment and leadership.

The same is true of the drive to improve our nation's health.

Last week, I hosted, in Edinburgh, an international conference of leading public health experts.

I was proud to show them the sights of our capital city.

But I was ashamed to tell them that Scotland has the lowest life expectancy in Western Europe.

Consider that: oil-rich Scotland with the lowest life expectancy in Western Europe.

What an indictment of decades London government.

Delegates, our government will not be able to turn around that legacy over-night. But we won't fail to act in the way that so many governments have done before.

Already we are devising a new anti poverty strategy and investing record sums in the battles against drugs, alcohol and smoking.

Our Ministerial Taskforce on Health Inequalities – chaired by Shona Robison – will report next month and point the way ahead.

There's no doubt that action and investment in the early years of children's lives will be crucial.

That is why we are right to immunize young girls against cervical cancer.

It is why we are working to expand nursery education.

And it is why we should be proud that our government is piloting universal free school meals in the first three years of primary school.

Delegates, the task of making Scotland healthier is a long term challenge but there is much we can do now.

Everyone in Scotland was shocked by the tragic death over Christmas of footballer Phil O'Donnell.

Sudden Cardiac Death is rare, very rare.

But it does claim too many fit, active young lives.

Young men are ten times more vulnerable than women.

There have been many calls since Phil O'Donnell's death to introduce heart screening for all young athletes.

Opinion is mixed about the effectiveness of screening and there is a real need to develop a proper evidence base.

Professional sports men and women can often access screening tests through their sporting bodies.

But there is currently no access at all for non-professionals.

So I can announce today that the government is working with the Scottish Football Association to establish a pilot programme that will provide, for the first time, a free screening service for amateur athletes in Scotland.

The pilot will involve Scottish government investment in the sports medicine centre at Hampden stadium, to create the extra capacity needed to offer this screening service to over-16s who are active in amateur sports.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Gordon Smith, the SFA Chief Executive and SFA Medical Officer Professor Stuart Hillis for their commitment and I look forward to working with them further to develop this important service for our young people.

Delegates,

Our first year in government has been one of solid achievement.

Delivering on health and education, stepping up the fight against crime, freezing council tax and helping our small businesses grow.

Despite the global economic climate, there is a new mood of optimism in our country. We feel good about ourselves again.

There is a real spring in Scotland's step.

The surge of confidence last November when Glasgow won the Commonwealth Games was electric.

And what an amazing achievement that was, not just for Glasgow, but for all of Scotland.

Fellow nationalists,

Over the past year, the people of Scotland have discovered that an SNP government has not led to the end of the world as we know it. The sky did not fall in. The four horsemen of the apocalypse are not stalking the land.

The experience of an SNP government has given the lie to all the claims of doom and despair from our political opponents.

Instead what we have is a Scottish government at long last prepared to take decisive action in the interests of our country.

A government that will not stay silent on the issues that matter to Scotland.

Over the past year, the Scottish people have acquired a taste for strong, effective government that always puts Scotland first.

They have seen the difference between a government in power for a purpose and an executive whose only purpose was being in power.

And they respect the difference – the real difference - between a First Minister who delivers and a Prime Minister who simply dithers.

Delegates, we now have a fair wind of good will at our backs.

The evidence of the polls and of all of our experience tell us that more and more Scots see independence as the natural next step for our country.

So is it any wonder that our opponents are running so scared of an independence referendum.

Well they can run as much as they want to but they will not escape the democratic will of the country.

No politician has the right to deny the Scottish people the opportunity to choose our country's future.

We believe in the sovereign will of the Scottish people. It is central to our values as a party and our commitment to independence.

And, when the referendum comes, as it will, we will work for and win independence for our country.

To do so, we must continue to build and keep the trust of the people of Scotland.

We must go on showing what difference a good government can make with the powers we already have, and so persuade the country how much better we could do with the real powers of independence.

Fellow nationalists,

Over the past year, we have come such a long way.

But the best, the real prize, our country's independence, is yet to come.

So let's go on and win it."