

Speech to Scottish Conference by Wendy Alexander, Leader of Labour in the Scottish Parliament

Conference, good afternoon.

It is a great honour for me to deliver my first Leader's Speech.

Conference I am conscious that for someone else, for different reasons, this is a significant occasion.

This is of course Lesley Quinn last conference as our General Secretary.

There have been many heartfelt tributes this weekend, but let me add my own.

Lesley, your modesty this morning meant you omitted to mention that you have led our party organisation through the years of our greatest ever electoral success.

You have been like a mother to wayward children.
discipline when it was required,
support when we were discouraged,
and always a great example to us all.

So can I now on behalf of the whole party – thank you Lesley.

Conference, I was born on the 27th June 1963.
Harold Wilson was leader of the Labour Party.
John F. Kennedy was President of the USA.
And in a Manchester hotel room, those rather more famous pop stars, John Lennon and Paul McCartney had just finished writing She Loves You
- a song that would herald a whole new age of popular music.

Some of my earliest memories are of walking across the suspension bridge in Glasgow, from our home in Clyde Street to the south side.

Day in day out, you could see the demolition balls swinging, pounding the life out of the old Gorbals Tenements.

And what was left, was like looking into a lifesize dolls house – people's homes ripped open for all to see - rooms painted bright pink and turquoise – rendered to rubble.

I was horrified, but I was also fascinated.

Of course as a small child, I did not really understand what was going on – but looking back - what stayed with me was the knowledge that things never stay the same – that this is a world of constant change.

By the time I was 7 my parents had moved from the city to the comforts of small town Renfrewshire.

There was much to enjoy the nice garden, rising prosperity, a brand new school – built by the last Labour Government.

And like any teenager my interests were in when could I get my first platform shoes, go to a Bay City Rollers concert and slightly later how could I look old enough to get into Saturday Night Fever at the local cinema.

But the injustices of life were also still there for anyone with eyes to see. My friend whose dad died, rescuing colleagues from an explosion, on a ship in dry dock in Greenock.

Other school friends families coping with unemployment at Chrysler or India Tyres, or simply with the challenges life throws at us illness, problems at work, family breakdown.

And as a minister's daughter, of course, there was church on a Sunday.

Not just the crowded family services where people would worry about the developing world, or the environment or peace – but the quiet service at Erskine Hospital where the sacrifices of earlier generations spilled into the pain of the present.

And through all these years, I was learning, that in life we have a choice. Either you become one of those people who simply stand and watch the world go by, or you are someone who decides to try and shape that change for the better.

I knew I was on the side of change.
And that the best way to do that was to work, together, with others.

That is why I joined the Labour Party.

I am sure every one of you here could tell your own story about why you are a Labour supporter. The route that leads you to be sitting in this hall today... whether by way of the Trade Union movement,
or the voluntary sector,
or local government,
or simply the strength of personal conviction

But each of us, however we got here, shares a common knowledge that Labour is much more than just a political party.

So whilst our electoral fortunes will ebb and flow - we will never forget why this Party claimed us.

Because for us – "Labour" is never simply a political party.

It is an attitude of mind;
An outlook on life,
a sense of historic,
of solidarity with and for others,
of struggle and achievement,
and even occasionally - heroic failure

As the Prime Minister said yesterday Labour's cause is not only the cause of ordinary working people everywhere

But the cause of -

Fighting poverty
Supporting the vulnerable
And speaking up for the voice.

Over these last two days these are the concerns which have dominated our debates.

Debates of a party learning the lessons of the last year, listening to the people and planning, together, the way ahead.

Let me tell you how I see it.

I was elected to lead this party, and that is what I intend to do,

I will lead by rebuilding Scottish Labour as a campaigning force,

I will lead by exposing the dishonesty and incompetence of the SNP administration,

I will lead by developing a new programme for government.

And just in case anyone's in any doubt I will lead Labour back to power in the Scottish Parliament.

So let's get down to what that means.

First of all, building the Party.

I joined this party in 1979. It was an incredibly exciting place for a teenager with a fascination for politics.

The meetings - that would debate South Africa or Palestine with a passion that made you think that Nelson Mandela or Yasser Arafat were sitting outside the roomwaiting for the result;

The arcane disputes over party rules which could only be resolved by a reference to that almost mythical figure, the oracle of Keir Hardie House, Jimmy Allison.

I loved that party.... but it was a different party for a different age.

An age when people still came home from their work at 5 o'clock; had their tea and then considered what to do next;

an age that when if you wanted to communicate with more than one person you had to go to a meeting;

an age when sophisticated electioneering consisted of shouting at the electorate through a crackly loudhailer "Vote Labour, vote Labour, vote Labour".

But for good or ill that age has gone.

Today people live different lives; lives dominated by long and flexible working hours, by digital television, the ipod and, above all, the internet.

And our campaigning and structures must reflect those changes.

In 2008, we need a modern party for a modern age.

So do we seriously believe that forcing activists to turn out in all weathers to a branch meeting on the first Tuesday of every month is the proper test of their commitment?

Today we ask so much more of our members. Not simply to fight an election once every five years – but an election almost every year.

In return we could at least offer members more of what they want - the chance to participate in meaningful policy making.

The Edinburgh Party is already doing this with policy conferences that reach out ... not just to those who already support us, but also to those who need to be persuaded to support us.

Our victories in 1997 and 1999 were not secured by clinging to our heartland vote. They came because we reached out to people right across Scotland.

We now have to rebuild that connection.

And Colin Smyth – our new General Secretary - will lead that effort.

He has the track record, the determination and the experience - to win.
Colin, we welcome you.

Labour also needs to reach out to the young people of Scotland.

We need to persuade new people to enter politics.
Labour people.... but people whose contributions to their communities have not necessarily been through the formal structures of our party.

We all know Labour candidates are sometimes chosen by only a handful of activists.

Is there another way?

Could we not look across the Atlantic to their caucuses and primary system and see if there is a way to give all local Labour supporters a say in who represents them?

If we have the will – it could provide the chance to think afresh about how we select our new candidates for the next Scottish elections.

A chance to lead perhaps, rather than to follow.

So I will invite Jackie Baillie, former chair of this Party and long term community activist, to take these issues forward and report back.

But reforming our own organisation must go hand in hand with exposing the dishonesty of the SNP.

They claim to be Scotland's Party but they have no monopoly on love of country.

We are all - from Scotland
and all - for Scotland.

On Monday I will head to Mull for a few days with Brian and the kids –
I will enjoy every moment of introducing the twins to wee boats - floating on a burn rather than in a bath, and to real LAMBS not just pictures in books, and to beachcombing as better fun, hopefully, than C-beebies.

Scotland is a country I love to the core of my being.

However "Scotland" is not a political philosophy.

"Scotland" can just as easily be Adam Smith as it can be John Smith.

The world over, politics comes down to a choice
right versus left,
conservatives versus progressives
nationalists versus internationalists

So in reality Scotland's choices are the same as in the rest of the Western world.

The SNP are wrong to believe they can defy the laws of political gravity.

And when you strip away the spin its clear where the SNP stand.

It is not on the side of those who believe in progressive taxation and public spending....but with those who favour tax cuts for the rich and what's left for the rest.

The SNP claim cutting business rates is popular...but let's see whether the closed schools; reduced services to pensioners; or staff redundancies are popular.

They claim abolishing the graduate endowment is popular...but let's see whether the cuts in our universities; the flight of our best academics; and less research and development are popular.

They claim the abolition of the council tax will be popular...but let's see how popular - when every worker has to pay the new NAT tax -- whilst those living off unearned income pay nothing at all.

So the landowner won't pay, but the crofter will
Hotel owners won't pay, but hotel workers will
Stockmarket speculators won't pay, but student nurses will

And conference lets not forget who helped the SNP pass their budget.

Annabel Goldie might no more support independence than I do... but she can recognise a right wing financial package when she sees one.

Who could really be surprised that when the chips were down the real Tories were prepared to support the tartan TORIES.

But of course this wasn't what we were promised last May.
The SNP promised to be more Labour than Labour itself.

They promised that student debt would be abolished.
They promised every first-time buyer would get a £2000 grant.
They promised primary class sizes would be cut to 18.
They promised a freeze in the council tax without cutting services.

EVERY ONE A BROKEN PROMISE.

We have had a large dose of easy populism – no question about it.
But progressive, left of centre compassion – don't you believe it.

Who could not be moved this week by the brave youngsters in Aberdeen - many once homeless themselves – sleeping rough all week in sub zero temperatures - to stop the next generation of Aberdeen's vulnerable youngsters having nowhere to go – because the SNP and Liberal led council is slashing funding to the Cyrenians.

Paul Hannan of the Cyrenians we welcome you here today – and we are with you.

Who dare say we are scaremongering now?

SNP cuts squeezing the life out of an organisation that turns lives around.

And it is a pattern being repeated across the country.

So delegates when you leave here tomorrow be preparing to stand – shoulder to shoulder – with those across Scotland that the SNP would victimise.

From the cuts in the Highlands to the closures in the Borders – let the homeless organisations, the children's organisations, the caring organisations – "look to Labour".

Let the message go our from Aviemore the "People's party" will be the "People's defence".

And as for the SNP - By their choices shall we know them.

Their choice...not just to cut funding for the homeless, but for vulnerable two-year-olds and for disabled children.

Their choice... to abandon Labour's school building programme,

Their choice... to ditch our commitment to more apprenticeships,

And their choice... to end the right of local government to raise its own revenues.

Conference we've seen these kind of choices before...and we've defeated them before.

And we will defeat them again.

The SNP - using Scotland,
Labour – serving Scotland.

And so it is no surprise that one thing the SNP could find money for, was the absurd
"National Conversation",
an invitation for every flag-burning blogger to rant and rave;
blame everything on the English,
and all at the taxpayers expense.

And talking of the blame game,

You may have noticed our First Minister was booed off the park at Hampden the other
night.

His aides tried to claim the fans were booing someone else.

Come off it First Minister – pull the other one.

But his response to 'Boo-gate' – as I see the newspapers are calling it – is typical.

Nothing is ever his fault –
Not the broken manifesto promises,
Not the council cuts,
Not the failing flagship - local income tax.

But come the next election, he will be taking the blame.

So this is the territory on which Scottish Labour will be happy to fight:

Left against right.
Cutting poverty against cutting taxes.
Rewarding hard work against unearned wealth.
Socialist against Nationalist.

Conference the fightback has begun.

And what does the Scottish Labour Party stand for?... The same things we always have – a
fairer chance in life.

But the aspirations of working people change.

And so Scottish Labour must be in tune with those rising aspirations.

It is no longer enough for all 3 and 4 year olds to simply be provided with nursery places.
A fully rewarding childhood means safe play areas – and parents with the time to enjoy
them with their children

It is no longer enough that everyone is guaranteed a decent education to sixteen. In future
every school leaver, with the qualifications, should have the right to a place at university,
or at college or a modern apprenticeship.

And it is no longer enough that the health service provides care based on reacting to illness - after the event.

Today heart attacks in Scotland are falling six times faster than they were before the smoking ban.

So let our thanks go out from this conference to Jack McConnell - not just for his many achievements as First Minister - but for the hundred of lives already saved as a result of this ban

Now it is time for a new agenda for Scotland.

As I said in my leadership campaign in building these new policies, we will listen. Because we will never have a better policy guide than the people themselves.

The programme that we put forward at the next Scottish Election has to reach out to all Scots.

But we will not wait until 2011 to start to make those changes.

Already we have begun the process of bringing forward new ideas and fresh thinking through parliamentary motions,
Through members bills,
Through public consultations,
Through policy conferences.

So Scottish Labour will offer Scots from cradle to grave a better chance in life.

I want to describe now what those better chances in life will mean in five key areas:

First better chances for our children.

Scottish Labour has already gone a long way to fulfilling the crying need for new schools - in Government we were building or modernising a new school every week. And nearly a year after the election, the only schools being built or rebuilt are ones that we initiated.
Since May SNP have commissioned not one extra new school.

So let me make this pledge here and now.
We will complete the school building programme.

But as soon as parents and pupils have a new school, their thoughts rightly turn to what is happening inside.

A better chance in life means that in future it should no longer be acceptable that A child can leave primary school with their life chances already wrecked because they cannot read.

So our next pledge will be every child a reader.

To achieve this Rhona Brankin has established a commission on literacy, building on the outstanding successes in West Dumbarton under Labour.

Ten years ago in that community one child in three had problems reading - today it is a handful.

We will give the new Literacy Commission an ambitious target. How to make Scotland the first country in the world to eradicate illiteracy.

And Scottish Labour will take particular care of our most vulnerable children. There are still great causes left to fight for. One is the fight against global poverty, but another is the fight against life chances stunted at birth here at home as a result of disadvantage, despair or deprivation.

Scottish Labour will stand up for those children growing up in the shadow of parental addiction.

We will begin by attacking that culture of hopelessness that passed from generation to generations by providing a nursery place - as of right - to every vulnerable two-year-old in Scotland.

Next, we will deliver a better chance in life for all our young people. We will begin by reaching out to the 5000 youngsters who leave school every year and do not go onto higher education or into training or employment.

Quite simply there are not nearly enough apprenticeships to go around.

I recently visited Carnegie College's School of Engineering and Technology at Rosyth. They told me about CR Smith who advertised for one apprentice joiner and had 300 applications.

So Scottish Labour will provide a guaranteed modern apprenticeship for every qualified 16-18 year old who wants one. Skills are Scotland's future.

So we are determined that the next generation of young Scots will be equipped to build the new Forth Crossing, the Edinburgh trams, the new homes, and the Commonwealth Games projects.

And we will take our case to the parliament - with a Bill led by John Park, himself a former apprentice at Rosyth.

And - as the trade union movement has long urged - we will look at wage subsidies for small employers to ensure they take on the apprentices the country needs.

This party can be proud that in government it has come closer than any other government to securing full employment. More Scots are in work than ever before.

But our next challenge is to ensure all workers are guaranteed respect and opportunity in the workplace.

In partnership with the unions and the STUC, Iain Gray will take this agenda forward. Tackling violence at work, providing skills to liberate low paid workers and delivering on equal pay.

Conference a better chance in life means being fitter and healthier. We should be proud of bringing NHS waiting lists down from 18 months to 18 weeks. But increasingly patients want to be more involved in managing their care. That is why Margaret Curran will be examining how to create a personal care plan for everyone with a chronic condition

We are today in the Highlands – a part of Scotland where over the last decade Labour has built stronger communities and created better chances in life for everyone who lives in them.

We achieved it by handing back the land to the people. Gigha, Uist, Knoydart, Colonsay. If we can empower rural communities what can we now do to hand back more community control to people living in urban neighbourhoods?

This party led the way on tackling anti-social behaviour bearing down hard on the vandalism that still scars too many of our communities.

The next phase means developing a new youth strategy for Scotland creating the opportunities our youngsters are looking for. And Pauline McNeill will lead that work.

And finally in an age when the reality of climate change is ever more pressing better chances demands faster more comprehensive action from all of us.

So Sarah Boyack will lead our efforts to ensure that the environment is increasingly at the heart of all we do:

That our public transport system is fit for purpose;

That our planning system defends the environment while not obstructing enterprise;

And our climate change strategy encourages both people and businesses to cut their carbon output.

Tackling all these issues is more than just a job for Holyrood. It will require a renewed confidence in local government and the voluntary sector.

The new Scottish Association of Labour Councillors working in partnership with Andy Kerr will highlight the difference a Labour council and Labour councillors can make in standing up for our communities.

Too many ask what Divides us. But we know what unites us.

And so working in partnership with Des Browne – who has been a great friend and colleague – and Cathy Jamieson, our tireless deputy leader – we will bring together MPs, MSPs, councillors and trade unionists drawing together the expertise and experience from right across team Labour.

And there is one final task we must undertake. Conference we must commit to a better chance in life for Scotland's elderly.

It means admitting that delivering free personal care was not enough.

We have an active, elderly population who are achieving amazing things. Look at Anne Poole from Farr, near Inverness who learned to fly and got her pilot's licence at the age of 65.

But there are others who are not so fortunate.

I watched my own grandmother slip deeper and deeper into the grip of Alzheimer's. It is an experience that some of you will also have witnessed at first hand.

We have much further to travel to help our vulnerable elderly live with dignity.

Wherever possible elderly people should be encouraged to stay in their own homes.

It will mean more support for carers and better respite care.

In care homes it means respect and dignity.

In future personal care for the elderly must become personalised care for the elderly.

Malcolm Chisholm will lead a Taskforce to draw up these plans.

So from cradle to grave Labour will offer Scots a better chance in life.
That is what it is all about.

If she were still alive today my granny would be 103.

And she would not recognise the world my kids inhabit...nor their favourite pastime of finding ever-more ingenious way of sabotaging their mother's mobile phone.

My daughter favours chewing it to bits...and my son excels at throwing it down the toilet.
But what my granny would recognise is how far we have come in the past 100 years.

And yet for us the work is never done.

For every milestone we reach we will always see another and a better mile stretching out ahead of us.

In the 21st Century, the challenges have changed... but our values are constant.

Values of social justice, of redistribution of wealth, of equal opportunity for all.

These were the values that saw Keir Hardie go from Lanarkshire to London as our first ever Labour MP.

The values which saw John Wheatley go from the slums of Glasgow's East End to the Housing Ministry whose achievements surround us even today.

The values which saw the giants of Attlee's 1945 Labour Government, turn around a country ravaged by war.

The values which in the Sixties and Seventies Willie Ross and John Smith made synonymous with Scotland itself.

The values which led Donald Dewar to establish the Scottish Parliament in which I and my colleagues are privileged to serve.

They all had dreams for a better Scotland and, in their time, they turned their dreams into reality.

If any of these greats of our party were here today would they think we have done enough?

Not for a moment.

For the values which drove them, still, drive us today.

Gordon Brown and his colleagues at Westminster;

me and my colleagues in Holyrood...

Labour councillors up and down the country

And every one of us in this hall,

Values summed up in one word...

the word Keir Hardie chose for the name of our party all those years ago...LABOUR.

So it falls to us to carry the mantle.

To be the voice of all the people of Scotland.

So let us leave Aviemore with one voice,

the voice of Scottish Labour,

Not a voice of Scotland's past,

but the voice of Scotland's future.

Conference, here at Aviemore, the fightback's begun, together - let's get to work.