

SCOTTISH CONSERVATIVE MANIFESTO
SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTION 2007

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INTRODUCTION

Politicians must be more realistic. For the vast majority of people in Scotland, devolution in the hands of the Lib-Lab Pact has been a disappointment.

It has failed to deliver on the issues that matter most to them, like housing and public services. It has allowed itself to become embroiled in issues which attract a great deal of attention, but deliver little benefit to the nation. And too many MSPs have used their office as a platform to grandstand on issues that have nothing to do with them, and are not within the competence of the Scottish Parliament. There must be change.

This manifesto outlines our policies on the issues that matter the most to the people of Scotland. It shows what we will do to make the Scottish Parliament work better for Scotland.

People are optimistic about our devolved future, but they're sick and tired of the Lib-Lab Pact – sick and tired of it failing Scotland and giving our Parliament a bad name.

There has been a great deal of debate about whether the necessary change is best delivered by the Scottish Conservatives or the Scottish Nationalists. The answer is clear. The Nationalists don't offer change. They've only opposed 8 Lib-Lab Bills in 8 years – that's not a voice, it's an echo.

All they offer is a divorce from the UK. However this election is not about divorce – it's about delivery.

That's why Scottish Conservatives will be focussing on those areas where the Scottish Parliament in the hands of the Lib-Lab Pact has failed to deliver.

That means putting social responsibility at the heart of what we believe in as Conservatives. We know that in order to improve people's quality of life, we all have to play our part – government, businesses, social enterprises, charities, communities, families and individuals. We're all in this together. So Conservatives will be the voice of the people in their Parliament.

We'll be their voice on issues like the lack of affordable homes. Many young families try in vain to get a foot on the ladder, and older people are struggling to keep their homes in the face of rising bills. Tackling this issue must be a key priority for Scotland.

As must the need to really stand up for Scotland's families. Government often makes it difficult for them to live, work, raise their families, access healthcare and manage their finances. We need to make it easier.

And, of course, we must tackle the issues of crime and drugs abuse. We need tougher sentencing, neighbourhood policing and more drug rehabilitation. We don't put a price on the delivery of justice and the protection of Scotland's people.

These issues are Scotland's issues. They are the issues on which Scotland expects and deserves its Parliament to deliver. They are the issues on which Scottish Conservatives will deliver. Scottish Conservatives are Your Voice in Parliament.

PEOPLE, FAMILIES AND THEIR COMMUNITIES

- Power to Councils, Power to Charities, Power to Communities
- Standing up for Families
- Homes for All
- Action on Climate Change
- Sustainable, Secure Energy Supplies

What kind of country is Scotland, and what kind of country do we want it to be? The answer to these questions lies not with politicians. The First Minister doesn't shape our country. Political parties don't control our destiny. Governments and councils don't dictate the image we portray to the world. We do those things ourselves. People, families, charities, and communities are the craftsmen of our identity as a society. The job of the state is not to interfere in this process – merely to facilitate it.

Sometimes, though, the state oversteps the mark. It takes too much power away from people, families and communities, and gives it to politicians, bureaucrats and quangos. It takes charities and voluntary organisations and attempts to turn them into extensions of the state. We'll give that power back. We want to see some powers passed from the Scottish Parliament to town halls – often local councils are in a better position to meet the needs of their area than the Scottish Executive. We want to see other powers passed from local authorities to community councils – some of the functions performed by town halls could be dealt with more efficiently by these small community forums. Most of all, we want to see all levels of government give some powers back to people themselves. People know best what they need – they don't need politicians making every decision for them.

Our entire approach is based on a simple premise – if it *can* be done locally, it *should* be done locally.

Power to Councils, Power to Charities, Power to Communities

Government is generally not good at running things. That's why, wherever possible, we need to make sure that it doesn't. We think that after eight years of devolved government at Holyrood, we need a full assessment of where certain powers should lie. So, we will commission a review of local government in Scotland, with a remit to pass power, wherever possible, back to people.

While this review is in progress, we will be taking steps to significantly reduce the ring-fencing of funds, imposed on local government by the Lib-Lab Pact. With the exception of funding for joint police and fire boards, local authorities will be free to spend their money as they see

fit. No more Executive pet projects which a local council has to implement with one arm tied behind its back. If we are serious about increasing local accountability and passing power down from Edinburgh, then we must act in deed as well as word. And if the people are not satisfied with their council's performance, they should vote for change. That is the way to improve the performance of local authorities.

However, more needs to be done to ensure that local authorities remain under the spotlight of their electors. That's why we want council elections moved to the mid-point of the Scottish Parliamentary term. The Labour Party has fixed the dates of local authority elections on the same day as the Scottish Parliament elections in order to hide the poor performance of Scotland's predominantly Labour councils behind the hustle and bustle of a Parliamentary election. We'll move the date of local authority elections, to give them the status, and the scrutiny, they deserve. We are also attracted to the concept of a directly elected Provost, where there is local demand, and this will be part of the local government review.

We'd also expect local authorities to consider allocating budgets to community councils. Scotland has hundreds of flourishing community councils, and it makes sense to help them to act in the best interests of their fellow residents. It's their community – they know what to do with it.

At times, neither local authorities nor community councils have all the answers. Often, the best approach is to give more scope to charities, social enterprises and voluntary organisations. Scotland is an extremely socially aware and compassionate nation. We always have been. We pride ourselves in helping each other out, and doing our bit for our communities.

But our charities, voluntary organisations and social enterprises are often too heavily regulated, and too heavily leant upon by the state to carry out government policies. We will reverse this trend, and defend the autonomy of Scotland's voluntary sector. We need a simple, common-sense approach to red-tape and particularly to disclosure, an area where there is unnecessary complication. The job of the voluntary sector is best done independent of the state, and we will provide the tools to do it.

Standing Up For Families

The family is the most important institution in Scotland. It is the family which teaches us how to make a positive contribution to our society and our economy. It is the family unit which provides the moral compass to guide people through life, which they in turn pass

on to their own families. Everything we do as politicians should be geared towards helping families. The litmus-test for any policy should be the effect it has on families and on family life.

There is no such thing as a 'standard' family. Many families are headed by only one parent. Many families are headed by parents who are not married. Many are childless families, and many are households with same-sex couples.

It is not the job of the state to get involved in family life; far less to pass judgement on the merits of one individual family over another. That being said, it is the job of the state to ensure that the conditions are in place to maximise the potential of our nation's children. There are many examples of single parents courageously and successfully bringing up children. However, research confirms that the chance of a child securing a good education, living a healthy lifestyle, staying away from the trap of criminal activity and becoming a productive worker and member of society, is increased if they are part of a family in which the parents are married and living together. Social breakdown in general – drugs abuse, alcohol abuse, criminality, debt, and state-dependency in particular – is clearly linked to family breakdown. So in order to reverse Scotland's social breakdown, it is the job of government to put in place the structures to reverse family breakdown and encourage stability and commitment. We will do just that.

Bringing up children is the hardest, but most rewarding job in the world. It takes commitment from, and puts strain on, parents. In modern Scotland, parents normally have to work in order to maintain the quality of life they want for their families.

Parents should be entitled to greater flexibility in the provision of nursery education and childcare requirements. At present, their choices are often curtailed by local and national government stipulating an unreasonably narrow list of accepted providers, which prevents many parents from accessing the combination of support which best meets their requirements. It should be left to parents, not councils, to decide with which nursery they should use their 12 ½ hour free weekly entitlement. To help parents combine this with childcare requirements, we will encourage all employers to make salary-sacrifice childcare vouchers available to their employees, and we will ensure that the public sector leads the way in this provision. We want parents to have more choice over how best to use this money, and we will work with our colleagues at Westminster to make this a reality.

We will work with our colleagues at Westminster to bring forward other proposals to benefit the family. The care of children should be a choice for parents, not politicians, and Conservatives will always support the choices families make.

That's why we will also continue to oppose a local income tax which will punish the average working family.

Governments often make life difficult for families. But families are the future of our country. And we'll make life easier for them.

Homes for All

Most people in Scotland have aspired to home ownership at some point in their lives. Millions of them have fulfilled that aspiration – hundreds of thousands as a direct result of the Conservative Governments of the 1980s giving them the opportunity to buy their council house. We are extremely proud of the legacy of home ownership we left Scotland, and we're proud to advocate its continuation. However, the 21st century brings new challenges, and it is our job to take them on.

The lack of affordable homes is a major issue all over Scotland. Politicians frequently pay lip-service to the problem, but the barriers to home ownership remain in place. We believe it's time to stop talking, and start acting. To a significant degree, the lack of affordable homes has been a symptom of Scotland's outdated planning system. The supply of available land has been reduced, which means that fewer houses have been built. Consequently, local shops have fewer customers, local transport has become less viable through lack of use, local schools are under threat because of a lack of pupils, and local people are forced to leave their villages and towns in search of homes elsewhere.

We are hopeful that the new planning laws will involve local people at an early stage, give them a real voice in the type of developments they want to see, and encourage the cultural change which the country needs in order to give young families, in particular, a chance to own a home in their area.

However we need more than just a change in the planning culture. Home ownership is already too expensive for many people – including key workers like teachers and nurses – and we need to ensure that they are given help to climb onto the housing ladder. The shared ownership housing schemes currently in place are too narrow and available to too few people. That's why, in addition to existing schemes, we will create local Affordable Homes Trusts (AHTs), run by trustees independent from the state. Individuals and businesses will be able to make a redeemable investment in the AHTs, with prospective homeowners applying for assistance in owning a home of their choice, in an area of their choice. We would propose an initial fund of £100m per year, one-third of which will be contributed by the Scottish Executive and the rest procured from the private sector. AHTs will enable workers and their families to choose a home suitable for

their needs, and help rejuvenate many ageing local communities. They will also be an opportunity for individuals and businesses with corporate social responsibility in mind to give something back; to help out those who want to enjoy the freedom of home ownership. And they will recognise that society and the state have a shared responsibility to provide people with the opportunity to buy an affordable home.

But it's unrealistic to expect everyone to own their own home. So we want to ensure that social rented housing works better for those who need it. To do this, we will continue to encourage the transfer of the local authority housing stock to housing associations, area by area rather than all at once, as has recently been tried and failed. We will also transfer housing allocation powers to local government. The present centralised control leads to families being matched with homes which are unsuitable for their needs and for the community. Local authorities will make a local judgement based on local circumstances, and they have a far greater chance of getting that judgement right than remote politicians at Holyrood. To complement this, we will abolish Communities Scotland, and fund local housing associations direct. We believe that Communities Scotland's other functions can be better delivered either direct by the Scottish Executive or by local government.

Action on Climate Change

Climate change is an immense world concern. Scotland is a small emitter of carbon, in absolute and relative terms. Nonetheless, we have our own moral obligation to preserve our planet, and do all we can to reduce the size of Scotland's carbon footprint.

Local authorities around Scotland are promoting an increase in recycling facilities, and we endorse this wholeheartedly. It is their job to devise sensible recycling solutions. However it's not just local government's job to promote environmental vigilance – we must lead the way from the Scottish Parliament. We will call for an urgent review of building standards to incorporate world-class energy saving design.

Furthermore, we will invest £12 million per year into an Eco-Bonus Scheme. Households, communities and small businesses would be entitled to apply for a grant to install modern energy-saving and energy-creating technology. This may include such technologies as hydro-electric, wind turbines, solar water and solar space heating, heat pumps and wood fuel heating. Households and businesses will be entitled to apply for a grant of up to £4,000, which would help to cover the costs of buying and installing a wind turbine or solar panels. Community projects will be eligible for a grant of up to £100,000.

These consumers would enjoy a cut in their energy bills, the economy would enjoy a boost to small-scale renewable technology production, and the planet would enjoy a reduction in carbon emissions. Under this initiative, there are no losers. Only winners.

Scotland also has the opportunity to lead the world in Carbon Capture and Storage. As the Stern Review and others have emphasised, this exciting technology will be essential if we are to combine economic growth with meeting our domestic and international commitments on reducing carbon emissions. Carbon Capture and Storage also provides a huge economic opportunity for Scotland, and is likely to play a key role in a sustainable North Sea economy after the oil and gas are gone.

BP and Scottish and Southern Electric's Peterhead project provides one of the best opportunities for the world's first full-scale demonstration of Carbon Capture and Storage. But there is a risk that the Labour Government's refusal to provide clear signals for investment will result in this unique opportunity being lost. Together with our colleagues at Westminster we will press the Labour Government to provide the stable long-term incentives that are needed for investment in this crucial technology.

Sustainable, Secure Energy Supplies

The government has a duty to ensure that its citizens have access to a ready, sustainable and secure energy supply. It also has a fundamental responsibility to ensure that there is base-load capacity which can be met in a cost-effective manner.

We are concerned that in Scotland the current subsidy regime for renewable energy is leading to the over-development of on-shore windfarms, which is putting this stability and security in jeopardy. We will therefore seek to adapt the renewables obligation system to incentivise other renewable supplies like wave energy and biomass.

The use of nuclear power is a decision for the Westminster government to take. However, if the government endorses its use and a company applies for permission to build on a suitable site in Scotland, Conservatives in the Scottish Parliament will not block it.

DELIVERING REAL JUSTICE

- Victims First
- Safer Streets
- Stronger Sentences
- More Effective Prisons
- Defeating Drugs

The primary duty of government is to protect the public from harm; to protect decent, law-abiding people from those amongst us who seek to ruin lives through violent crime, assault, injury, intimidation, vandalism and theft. The Lib-Lab Pact is not fulfilling this obligation.

In part, the Government's negligence is a product of its inability to deal not just with crime, but its causes – primary among them drug and alcohol abuse. In too many cases, teenagers fall into this cycle of abuse and their future path as a criminal has a depressing inevitability.

Crime can affect anyone, at any time, when they least expect it. Usually, the most vulnerable groups in society are those worst scarred by crime. Teenagers. Ethnic minorities. The elderly.

In Scotland, a crime or offence is committed every 30 seconds. Since 1999, rape and attempted rape, fire raising and vandalism and drug crime are all up by about half. There have also been substantial increases in crimes of indecency, serious assault, handling an offensive weapon, petty assault, breach of the peace and domestic abuse. Perhaps worst of all, these figures only apply to those crimes which have been reported to the police. Shockingly, the latest Scottish Crime Survey revealed that 3 out of 4 crimes are never reported.

This goes to the heart of the lack of public confidence in the justice system. Many Scots feel helpless, which is why they no longer report crime. They suspect that our overworked police will find it difficult to respond, that even if they catch the criminal a conviction is unlikely, and that even if convicted the punishment will be inadequate.

This is corrosive to a stable society. It cannot go on. We must put safety first. We must put the victim first. And we must restore faith in the justice system. Scottish Conservatives will do it.

Victims First

Conservative policies are aimed at rebalancing Scotland's justice system. Far too often, the supposed needs of the criminal have taken precedence over the needs of the victim. We consider this to be a

grotesque aberration, and a prime example of the government losing sight of the difference between right and wrong.

Victims of crime deserve more attention and information from the justice system through the duration of their case, so we will ensure that they are regularly briefed on developments by the police and by the Crown Office. They deserve a rapid resolution to their complaint, and so we will ensure that there are enough Procurators Fiscal, Sheriffs and Judges to facilitate an efficient process. They deserve better than to have the delivery of justice impeded by fear and intimidation, so we will ensure that victims and witnesses are given protection and are able to play their part without fear of retribution. Victims deserve better. They and their families will always come first under the Conservatives.

Safer Streets

The overwhelming majority of Scots are lawful, honest and decent. They strengthen the economy and contribute to society. They make Scotland what it is. The least they can expect in return is to be able to go about their lives without fearing victimisation by criminals.

Conservatives will give them reason to feel more secure. A larger police presence cuts crime. At present, there are a mere 147 police officers on the beat at any one time, throughout the whole of Scotland. So we will hire 1,500 more police officers. But we don't want them sitting behind a desk filling out forms. We want them in our neighbourhoods providing reassurance, sharing information, gathering intelligence to deter and detect crime, and making our streets safer. To help this, Conservatives will work with Chief Constables to eliminate the red tape and bureaucracy which inhibits the delivery of justice. Residents will be encouraged to play their part too. We want to see communities with thriving Neighbourhood Watch schemes, where residents meet regularly to discuss developments. This is social responsibility in action, and we believe that it will herald a new era of civic confidence.

Social responsibility will be complemented by police accountability. Under our system local police will be expected to publish regular crime statistics, community by community, so that residents can see for themselves whether crime is going up or down. And if residents are unhappy with police performance, they will have a right to do something about it, because the Convenors of each Police Board will have to stand for election. If the Convenor is not doing his or her job well enough, he or she will lose it.

We believe that this will be incentive enough for the police to take the necessary steps to make our streets safer. We expect them to show

zero-tolerance towards vandalism, graffiti, anti-social behaviour and under-age drinking.

One of their most important tasks will be working with youngsters to help them stay on the straight and narrow. We will help them by ensuring that 14 and 15 year old persistent offenders go to Youth Courts, and that Children's Hearings have the power to issue Drug Treatment and Testing Orders. The police have a huge role to play not only in preventing youngsters from committing crime, but in providing them with an often much needed role model.

Stronger Sentences

Conservatives believe that the sentences many criminals actually serve do not adequately reflect the seriousness of the offence they have committed. We are staunch protectors of judicial independence, but equally we have not been afraid to say when we feel a sentence by a judge has been so outrageous as to be an insult to the victim of the crime and their family.

Conservatives will work to rectify this. The first step is to inject some basic honesty into Scotland's sentencing. Since 1999 prisoners have walked free after serving either half or two-thirds of their sentence. We are convinced that the Lib-Lab Pact's new sentencing proposals weaken sentencing even further. Early release, whether the pre-Sentencing Act or post-Sentencing Act version, does a disservice to victims. For eight years, we have been the lone voice in the Scottish Parliament arguing for the end of the practice of automatic early release, and we will continue the fight to achieve this.

Secondly, we will introduce a "three strikes and you're out" policy. If a criminal is about to receive a third custodial sentence, the Judge or Sheriff will be required to add an extra period of jail, proportionate to those three sentences. Politicians must send a message, both to criminals and to ordinary people, that crime does not pay. Under the Conservatives, the era of law breakers getting off scot-free will be over.

Another unwelcome era which we will help bring to an end is the one which has allowed suspected murderers, rapists and other violent criminals to be given bail whilst they await their trial. This just isn't acceptable. We will review the operation of bail following upon recent legislation in the Scottish Parliament. We need to ensure that a judge has the necessary discretion to refuse bail where the circumstances of the accused and the alleged crime do not justify bail being granted.

We are fiercely proud of Scotland's unique legal system. We believe in judicial independence, and that persons accused of serious offences like murder have the right to be judged by a jury of their peers.

Nonetheless, of equal importance to the protection of our system is the acknowledgement that a change is sometimes needed to reflect a new era. In recent years, forensic technology has advanced to such an extent that material not formerly usable as evidence could now be pivotal. In England, the law has been changed to allow suspects to be tried more than once for the same crime, if new and compelling evidence surfaces. We believe the same change should be made in Scotland to our 'double jeopardy' law. We anticipate its use being very rare, but in those few serious cases where new and compelling evidence enables the delivery of justice to a killer, and solace to a family, it is a change well worth making.

More Effective Prisons

Conservatives accept that our stronger sentencing policies will require an extra prison in the short term. That's why we have set money aside in our budget to build and run it. It is likely that the pressure on prison space will recede in the years that follow. International evidence shows that Scotland imprisons a small number of criminals relative to crimes committed. Countries, including the Republic of Ireland, which imprisons a larger number of criminals per crime have far lower crime rates. If the same thing happens in Scotland, the long-term demand for prison space will fall.

Conservatives do not want a large prison population. We simply want dangerous people to be in jail so that the general public is protected from them, so that criminals can be punished and rehabilitated, and so that would-be criminals are deterred. However, not all law-breakers fit that description. Most fine defaulters are not a danger to the public, and as such should not be in jail. We will ensure that Judges and Sheriffs are able to use their powers to deduct fines from salaries *and* benefits. Sheriff Clerks will require fine defaulters to complete a payment mandate before they leave the Court. Having fine defaulters in jail whilst dangerous thugs walk the streets is absurd, and we will change it.

There are a number of prisoners who are too dangerous and too sadistic to ever be released. However, most prisoners have shorter sentences, and it is the responsibility of the government to ensure that on release these prisoners will not slip into a life of re-offending. Scotland's record is woeful. We need to improve it. Our increased prison capacity will reduce overcrowding, enabling prison staff to spend more time on effective rehabilitation of offenders. Alternatives to custody have a role to play, but they must never be a soft option, nor should they be favoured because of a lack of space in our jails.

We will take another major step in our campaign to reduce re-offending. The release and housing of convicted sex offenders is an understandable source of great worry to many people, especially

parents. It's little wonder, given the horror stories of children abused and killed by offenders who were clearly not fit to be living amongst families. We will require released sex offenders to undergo polygraph tests. Such a system has been piloted internationally, and has been proven as an effective way to ascertain the behaviour of these offenders. We will also monitor their movements through the introduction of satellite tracking.

Ultimately, Conservatives believe that there is little or no chance of rehabilitating any type of prisoner and substantially improving the re-offending rate unless the scourge of drugs abuse is eradicated from our prisons. It is completely unacceptable for there to be any illegal drug use in prison. We will take all necessary steps to end it. Prisoners found to be in possession of any illegal substance will have their visitation rights suspended. Visitors bringing illegal substances into the prison will be prosecuted and prohibited from visiting the prison. If necessary, visits will take place from behind screens. There should also be random drug testing within our prisons, and we will ensure that drug addictive prisoners are supported clinically and encouraged towards abstinence. Drugs act as a brake on the rehabilitation of prisoners, and we will not tolerate their use in our jails.

Defeating Drugs

Drugs abuse scars many Scottish communities the length and breadth of the country. With 121 reported drug crimes every day in Scotland, it is clearly a primary contributory cause of crime, fuelled either by those under the influence of drugs or those stealing to fund their habit. It is reaching epidemic levels, and for the future of our country and prosperity of the next generation, we need to reduce people's use of harmful drugs. There is a drug related death almost every day in Scotland. We can't afford to let this continue.

The governments in Edinburgh and London have presided over a drugs disaster. Instead of reiterating the dangers of drug use, they have sent out mixed messages. Instead of adopting a zero-tolerance approach to drugs, they have gone soft by reducing the cannabis classification from B to C. And instead of stamping out heroin use through better rehabilitation, they have pursued a 'harm reduction' strategy which in many cases has amounted to state-sponsored methadone addiction.

Conservatives believe that overcoming Scotland's drugs problem is a key priority for the nation. That's why we're pledging massive resources to go towards expanding rehabilitation facilities for drug addicts in Scotland - £100m per year will be allocated to this. It would be a sensible investment, with official figures showing that every £1 invested in drug rehabilitation could save almost £10 in justice and

health costs. Every day in Scotland, almost 40 people seek help for drug addiction. Many are not assisted because there are not enough facilities. Scotland cannot afford to lose a generation to the scourge of drugs. Our proposals will ensure that it doesn't happen. By introducing a Scottish Directory of Rehabilitation Facilities, we will ensure that there is a public register of available facilities.

Conservatives will also require every methadone prescriber to record for how long a patient has been on methadone and, in consultation with the patient, to determine a future treatment plan designed to take the user off heroin *and* methadone for good. There are currently over 1,250 methadone prescriptions handed out every day in Scotland, at a cost of over £12m a year. Too much methadone; too little rehabilitation.

We will also permit District Courts to issue Drug Treatment and Testing Orders. In addition, we believe that those who sell drugs are treated with far more compassion than is often afforded to their victims. We'll end that, by ensuring that drug dealers are tried on no lesser a complaint than indictment in the Sheriff Court, which thanks to Conservative legislation now carries a longer maximum sentence.

CREATING A PROSPEROUS SCOTTISH ECONOMY

- Half-Price Council Tax for Older Pensioners
- Transport fit for the 21st Century
- A Better Way for Scottish Water
- Streamlining Scottish Enterprise
- Standing Up for Small Business
- The Scottish Brand

A strong economy is the foundation on which any nation is built. Without it, our education and health services suffer from a lack of investment, our transport infrastructure degrades, and we have scant resources to tackle crime. And the process is reciprocal, because without good schools and hospitals, modern roads and railways and safe streets, it is difficult for the economy to grow significantly. Moreover, social responsibility requires vibrant local economies.

Scotland's economy has been growing too slowly under Labour. In some years, there has been barely any growth at all. Rising taxes are part of the problem. Council tax has risen by over 60% under the Lib-Lab Pact. And business rates have been raised above the English level, making it more cost effective to do business in Carlisle than Dumfries. Excessive legislation and regulation have also restricted growth by making it more difficult for our firms to do business. And the lack of efficiency of Scottish Water is acting as a brake on economic development.

Compounding Scotland's economic difficulties, the Lib-Lab Pact has wasted too much taxpayers' money. It has poured billions of pounds into our education and health services, without visible improvement. We want to see well funded public services, but in order for those services to improve we need to change the way we run them. Waste in health and education is every bit as socially and economically unacceptable as waste on government limousines and spin doctors. The Lib-Lab Pact has also disproportionately increased the size of the public sector in relation to the rise in the number of workers whose pay cheques are signed by private sector employees. There are now over 50,000 more public sector employees than there were in 1999. Scotland's public sector is now swallowing up over 50% of our GDP.

This needs to be reversed. Expanding the public sector at the expense of the wealth-creating private sector is unsustainable. We will lead by example as we seek to make a change. At present, there are too many MSPs. We see merit in reducing their number from 129 to 108, as originally intended by the Scotland Act. That's more than enough to run the nation, and it will save taxpayers nearly £3m, which they can better spend themselves.

One reason why the government has been allowed to waste money on such a grand scale is that there is a lack of accountability and responsibility over the funding it receives. Conservatives acknowledge that there is a debate to be had about the powers of the Scottish Parliament. We believe that devolution is a process, not an event, and so we would welcome this debate. However, our overriding priority is to make better use of the current powers to benefit the people of Scotland. We also prioritise spending Scotland's block grant more effectively and efficiently over using Holyrood's existing tax-varying power.

Any debate should be broader than one which only involves the political parties in the Scottish Parliament. It must include Scottish businesses, civic Scotland, and the parties of the Westminster Parliament.

Half-Price Council Tax for Older Pensioners

Council tax has risen by over 60% since the Lib-Lab Pact came to power. That's more than double the rate of inflation – the measure to which pensions are linked. Scotland's pensioners have been hit particularly hard by this. The small increases in their income have been dwarfed by huge increases not only in council tax, but in energy bills as well.

Our pensioners have contributed so much to Scotland: raising families, contributing to the economy, fighting for our freedom. They deserve better. We will see that they get better.

We will cut council tax in half for all pensioner households where the occupants are over the age of 65. This will not be means tested, and will be in addition to the discount a single pensioner already receives. We will write it into statute alongside the existing single person's discount, in order to guarantee that the discount will be ongoing. Too many politicians offer pensioners pre-election bribes only to snatch them back after their vote has been cast. Not us. A typical single pensioner in a band D house can expect to save well over £400 per year, and an equivalent pensioner couple will see a reduction of almost £600. That's a fair deal for pensioners, and unlike an SNP/Lib Dem local income tax, it isn't at the expense of hard-working families.

Transport Fit for the 21st Century

All nations need a modern transport infrastructure to compete on a global scale. Our economy relies on transport to get people to work, to move goods from place to place, and to aid the movement of tourists around our cities and attractions. We know that Scotland's

infrastructure lags behind many of our neighbours and competitors, particularly on the Continent.

It's time for Scotland to blaze a trail. Working with our colleagues at Westminster, we are investigating how to get more out of our railways by looking at bringing track and train closer together.

Furthermore, we will set up a review to investigate the economic and environmental case for high-speed rail links. In particular, we will require it to consider high-speed lines between Glasgow and Edinburgh and between Scotland and London, and would expect it to report to both the Holyrood and Westminster Parliaments by 2009.

The effective integration of Glasgow and Edinburgh to form one 'twin-city' economic powerhouse for Scotland would be a revolutionary step. This will require an enormous improvement in the transport links between the two cities. So as part of our review, we will examine the option of a new Maglev or conventional high-speed rail service between Glasgow and Edinburgh. Whilst this would be a significant capital outlay, we would seek investment from the private sector, and it would reduce the usage of and the congestion on the M8, and most importantly would reduce the journey time from Edinburgh to Glasgow to less than 15 minutes. It is not in the nature of Scots to rest on our laurels – we must always aspire to better ourselves. And if the long-term benefits of this project are clear, we will not hesitate in building one of the most advanced rail links anywhere in the world.

This could be complemented by a faster, better service between Scotland and London. This journey is crucial for many Scots. Thousands of native Scots live in London, and thousands more regularly travel to London on business or pleasure. That's why good transport links between Scotland and London are so important. At present, most passengers make that journey by plane. This is perfectly understandable – it's quicker, and can often be cheaper. However, there are environmental costs to this preference, mainly through increased carbon emissions. We'd like to make sure that people from all over Britain have a viable alternative method of travel.

Further enhanced by cost-effective rail links to Glasgow and Edinburgh airports and an upgraded Waverley Station, Scotland could soon be set apart as a shining example of 21st century rail technology.

An improved road infrastructure is of equal importance. The previous Conservative government had an ambitious road building and upgrading programme which was scrapped by Labour. Since then, the Scottish government has begun work on the much-needed improvements to several major roads – we continue to support this and hope for their speedy completion. However, there is more to be done.

The most pressing project is to build a new crossing over the River Forth. Until studies are complete, we do not know with any certainty how long the Forth Road Bridge will remain operational. We do, however, have some facts at hand. Firstly, we know that there are concerns over the Bridge's suitability for haulage trucks post-2013. Secondly, we know that, at some point perhaps within the next 10 years, the bridge's lifespan for cars may also end. Thirdly, we know that any new crossing will take over 10 years to complete from the beginning of preparatory work. And fourthly, and most importantly, we know that our economy would suffer without a new crossing over the Forth. This is reason enough to begin preparation work on a crossing – be it a tunnel or a new bridge.

While the existing Forth Road Bridge is still operational, we believe there is a need to remove the toll for crossing it. We will do the same on the Tay Road Bridge. The removal of tolls on the Skye Bridge in the north-west and the Erskine Bridge in the west makes it unfair to expect motorists to pay to cross these eastern bridges. They have paid enough.

Indeed, drivers all over Scotland have paid enough. That's why we voted against the section of legislation which paved the way for the introduction of road tolls in Scotland, but which all other parties in the Parliament supported. Scottish Conservatives are committed to repealing that section of legislation, and will continue to oppose the introduction of any additional nationwide charges for using Scotland's existing roads.

We have set aside a further £30m per year in our budget to improve and upgrade key routes throughout Scotland. In the south-west, we will upgrade the A75, which is a key route connecting Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland with the M74, which in turn connects us to England and Europe. We will upgrade the A9 – the main route north from Perth to Inverness. The A82 between Glasgow and Inverness also requires improvements, and we will target finance there. And the A96, which connects the two great cities of the north – Aberdeen and Inverness – is in dire need of upgrading and improvement. This work will be beneficial to our nation's economy. But more importantly, it will improve the safety on some of Scotland's deadliest roads.

This is by no means an exhaustive list. We will constantly look to improve our road infrastructure. Safety will always be our number one priority. We'll never eliminate road deaths, but we can considerably reduce them. We have, in the past, proposed a Black Spot Road Funding programme. This was to target particularly dangerous bends and junctions, to carry out remedial work on them, and to make them safer. Not only do we still pledge to institute Black Spot; we will increase the funding we put towards it to £15m per annum.

We will continue to support the Scottish Air Route Development Fund, which has been of huge benefit to our national economy, both through increased business travel and tourism.

Inside Scotland, we will support alternative forms of transport. We continue to support the flexible provision of buses, and we will continue to provide finance to support genuine 'lifeline' ferry services which would otherwise not be commercially viable. We also support Conservative council groupings which seek to extend the use of local park and ride facilities.

A Better Way for Scottish Water

Whilst other services like telecommunications and energy are run by private companies owned by the people, Scottish Water is run and owned by the state. Quite simply, it is no longer fit for purpose.

Privately owned water companies in England and Wales offer better quality services at a cheaper price. Furthermore, the constraints on Scottish Water's borrowing capacity means that it is unable to build infrastructure sufficiently rapidly in areas earmarked for potential development. Scottish Water should be acting as a contributor to economic growth – not an inhibitor of it. It is a politician-controlled body in a consumer-controlled era. And it has to change.

We will liberate Scottish Water from state control. It will be mutualised using the model of Welsh Water – recognised as the best water company in Britain – and because it will be a not-for-dividend company, all its profits will be reinvested into the water infrastructure. As was the case with other former nationalised industries, we will see an improvement in quality, efficiency and innovation. Most importantly, the denationalisation of Scottish Water will allow for substantial investment in the sector. It will reposition Scotland's water provider as a friend of Scotland's economy rather than a millstone around its neck.

Streamlining Scottish Enterprise

Scottish Enterprise was a body originally set up to encourage inward investment into Scotland. It was successful in that task. However, post-devolution, Scottish Enterprise has been charged by the Lib-Lab Pact with a new and wider remit. It is no longer focussing on core economic strategy and growth activity. Once known for sensible and efficient use of its funding, it is now recognised as an organisation which is mired in internal bureaucracy and which wastes much of its half-billion pound taxpayer funded budget. Once regarded as a contributor to Scotland's economic growth, any economic progress is

in spite of, rather than because of Scottish Enterprise. Scottish Enterprise is currently not fit for purpose.

We will merge the budgets of Scottish Enterprise and Highlands & Islands Enterprise, making savings for re-investment and using the remainder more efficiently, in three different ways. Firstly, we will retain a body called Scottish Enterprise with a budget of £130m per year. This will perform the core of its current functions, in particular: the Co-Investment Fund; the Proof of Concept Fund; the Venture Fund; Intermediary Technology Institutes; R&D Plus; Scottish Development International; major national regeneration projects and providing Ministers with labour market information.

Secondly, we will establish a new Scottish Skills Agency, which will incorporate Careers Scotland and the skills functions of the existing Scottish Enterprise, with a total annual budget of £170m. The body will control Modern Apprenticeships, Get Ready for Work and Skill-Seekers functions. Working with the business community, it will perform a hugely important task. All over Scotland, businesses are struggling to hire staff – both from school and in some cases from university – with the basic skills required to perform the role. Too many Scottish youngsters lack the basic numeracy, literacy and people skills which are required in the modern workplace. Working with a vastly improved state education system, the Scottish Skills Agency will be responsible for righting this wrong.

Thirdly, we will abolish the existing costly and bureaucratic Local Enterprise Companies. Instead, we will give nearly £60m per annum directly to local authorities. In many cases, local authorities already carry out enterprise functions, and this unnecessary duplication will end. Furthermore, we believe that local authorities are best placed to understand the economic needs of their area – working with local business they will decide how best to use this money and they will be accountable for its use at the ballot box. This is particularly relevant to areas currently covered by HIE, whose councils will be able to deliver a much more localised service.

We will continue to fund the Prince's Scottish Youth Business Trust directly. The PSYBT is a unique provider in its field with a proven record of success. We must learn the lessons of its success and replicate them where possible.

Standing Up for Small Business

Small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) are the cornerstone of Scotland's economy. The length and breadth of our nation, they contribute to local economies, hire local staff, and supply the larger firms which are also so crucial to our prosperity. We will give greater

recognition to the work of these businesses. We will give them a helping hand, and really stand up for them.

We will allocate an annual sum of £150m to reduce the business rates burden on SMEs. Most small businesses will pay nothing at all, and many medium-sized businesses will receive a substantial discount. Firms with a rateable value of less than £7,000 will be completely exempt from business rates; those with rateable values between £7,000 and £8,000 will pay only a quarter of their bill; businesses with rateable values between £8,000 and £11,500 will pay half; and those with a rateable value of between £11,500 and £15,000 will receive a 10% discount.

We have fought for a competitive business rate in Scotland in relation to the rest of the UK, and we shall do everything possible to preserve that competitive base after the next rates revaluation. Many politicians make promises to small businesses which they can't keep. We won't do that. We are the only political party in Scotland with a fully costed and affordable programme to reduce business rates. We are the only political party in Scotland which stands up for small businesses.

We will also stand up for the communities in which these small businesses trade, and to which they contribute. Scotland's town centres, especially in rural areas, are finding it difficult to compete with larger chains and superstores which benefit from economies of scale in their pricing structure. Whilst we support local people making the choice to benefit from lower prices wherever they can find them, we do believe that small towns need a bustling High Street to maintain their distinctive character. To help them, we will establish a Town Centre Regeneration Fund, worth £20m every year. In order to benefit, towns would decide on a regeneration project and apply directly to the Scottish Executive for consideration. This will provide a timely boost not only to struggling Scottish towns, but to the nation's prosperity as a whole.

Small and large businesses alike have been hampered in recent years by excessive regulation and red tape. We fully appreciate that politicians have alienated the business community on this issue. Politicians of all colours promise a cut in red tape at every election, but when asked to name specific regulations they fall flat. That's why we will put tangible procedures in place which will achieve this much-needed loosening of regulatory ties. We will institute a sunset clause of 5 years on all primary legislative regulation created by the Scottish Parliament. After this time, civil servants will require to demonstrate that the regulation has been of proven worth before it will be renewed. For subordinate legislative regulation, we will establish a Red Tape Review mechanism which we believe will cut back on excessive interference.

We will also require all new legislation and regulation to pass an economic growth test before it is enacted. If it is shown to be an impediment to economic progress it will not be passed. Furthermore, we will insist that civil servants work to a presumption against, rather than in favour, of gold plating EU regulation, and we will task all quangos with an over-riding duty to promote economic growth.

Passing laws and regulations often makes politicians feel useful. However in too many cases it makes life harder, not just for private businesses, but for social enterprises, charities, and public sector employers like the NHS. Our aspiration is clear – to free these bodies from the straitjacket of regulative interference.

We also want to ensure that Scottish firms have easier access to public contracts. The current process is too long, too bureaucratic, too costly and characterised by unnecessary duplication. We will create a dedicated Scottish Public Procurement Unit, which will act as a single point of entry for all businesses which want to access public contracts. Applicants will be required to complete the necessary procedure and paperwork only once, and would then be free to compete for several contracts without repeating the process. It does neither private enterprise nor the public sector any favours to make this process long or difficult, so we will ensure that it is short, and simple.

Our procurement unit will also engage with social enterprises. One benefit will be the promotion of local food through knowledge of the European Union rules. This is beneficial not only to local economies, but to the environment, which suffers as a result of food travelling long distances. Such an innovation will be good for the economy, and good for the environment.

The Scottish Brand

The promotion of Scotland abroad is vital to Scotland – culturally and economically. Tourism is one of Scotland's biggest industries and without it the economy would perform even more poorly than it has since 1997. It is for this reason that we can never take tourism for granted. It is fair to say that Scotland has few rivals for its natural beauty, historical and architectural attractions, not to mention its festivals, bars and restaurants. However, we cannot presume that this is enough to attract an increasing number of tourists. Our pledges on business rate reductions and radical proposals to improve Scotland's transport infrastructure will be hugely beneficial. We will also oppose any additional taxes on the tourist industry, and we will ensure that our new Scottish Skills Agency emphasises the opportunities which lie in the tourist industry. But we need to do more. And we will.

Visit Scotland has a great deal of merit as a body focussing on marketing Scotland abroad. Not only would we retain it, but we wish it

to lead specifically Scottish initiatives instead of Visit Britain doing so. Scotland is uniquely different to the rest of Britain, and it is more appropriate for Visit Scotland to promote Scotland in international markets as an all-year-round destination of choice. We will also investigate a closer working relationship between Visit Scotland and Visit Britain to promote occupancy partnership at sites overseas.

However, we are greatly concerned at the effect that the abolition of Area Tourist Boards will have on the industry within Scotland. Generally, tourist initiatives within Scotland are better marketed by local tourist boards than a centralised one like Visit Scotland. Moreover, local bodies could play an invaluable role in promoting local products such as food, whisky, textiles and crafts, of which we have some of the very best in the world. We will consult on the effect that the abolition is having, and if necessary we will not hesitate to re-instate local bodies.

Many tourists enjoy Scottish arts and culture when they visit our nation. We are keen to see this sector flourish, however we are of the view that the bodies which oversee arts and culture face undue interference by the state. Recognising the importance of the arts to Scotland, we will ensure that these bodies are operationally independent from interference by politicians.

Whether here on holiday, or having returned to their homelands, all tourists remember one quintessentially Scottish brand – whisky. We share the Scotch Whisky Association's concerns that some foreign countries are portraying their product as Scotch. This is detrimental to our home industry, and we will pass the legislation required to alter labelling and bottling rules to stop this misleading practice. Scotch drinkers deserve to know they're drinking Scotch – not a poor imitation.

To complement our international reputation as a premier tourist destination, we believe that Scotland needs to enhance its status as a host of major world events. We put no limits on our aspirations to do this. In conjunction with the impressive SportScotland and EventScotland, we will work with colleagues in London to ensure that Scotland can reap the benefits of the London 2012 Olympic Games. Furthermore, we will go all-out to secure the 2014 Commonwealth Games for Glasgow. Using that experience and pending the establishment of a sound business case, we will support a bid by the Scottish Football Association to host the 2016 European Championship football tournament. Scotland is a major nation, which should aspire to host these major events.

A BRIGHTER FUTURE FOR EDUCATION

- A New Education Act
- Special Schools and Specialist Schools
- A Sustainable Future for Universities and Colleges

Scotland has a celebrated record of educating its citizens to a high standard. A great deal of intellectual thought, which has changed and guided the world in the last few hundred years, has been the product of an education in Scotland. Despite our size, far from letting the world shape us, we have helped shape the world around us. We Scots are justly proud of this achievement, and so we should be. We're also very protective of our ability to design our own, unique education system, and we've every right to be. However, many Scots are apprehensive about the performance of our current education system. That is an apprehension which people have every right to feel and which Scottish Conservatives share.

We need to focus a little bit less on ideology, and a little bit more on practicalities. The most important aspect of the Scotland's education system is its outcome. And in that regard, the facts are stark, and concerning. Violent physical assaults on teachers inside our schools have risen by 20% in the last year alone. More pupils in most local authority areas are failing to meet the Lib-Lab Pact's own minimum standards for reading, writing or maths. Most damning of all is the evidence businesses and their representative organisations all over Scotland present before us. They cannot get enough school leavers, and in some cases college or university graduates, with the basic literacy, numeracy and interpersonal abilities required to make a meaningful contribution in the workplace.

This is a critical time for Scottish education. We have a skills shortage at the heart of our economy which we need to fill. Moreover, we have a low level of new business start-ups, a low level of economic growth, and an uncompetitive economic environment all of which we want to correct with improved education and training.

However, despite the clear need for change and improvement in our education system, many politicians are standing idly by. For fear of upsetting the apple cart by questioning the effectiveness of the current educational structure, they seem happy to reinforce the virtues of the current system, against all available evidence which suggests it is not performing as well as it ought to be. Conservatives despair at this inertia. We are friends of Scottish education. We believe that a high-quality state education should be available to all. But, as good friends, we're not afraid to suggest change for improvement when it is required. And at present, it is so clearly required.

A New Education Act

The simple, fundamental problem with Scotland's education system is that politicians are in charge of it. This overbearing political interference and imposition is stifling the efforts of schools and teachers, and standards are slipping as a result. It's no surprise. Politicians are too remote, and too unaware of the needs of any individual school, let alone any individual pupil.

That's why we want to enhance the role of head teachers and reduce the role of politicians. We will bring before the Scottish Parliament a new Education Act. This Act will establish clear roles for all of the education partners. Local authorities will be in control of the overall education budget for their area, including the Educational Maintenance Allowance, which will in future only be disbursed subject to proven academic and vocational progress. Councils will also be responsible for the administration of catchment areas and for the provision of the school infrastructure in accordance with their local needs and plans.

There is concern amongst the business community about the shortage of school leavers proficient in sciences and technical subjects. Therefore, in partnership with local head teachers and further education institutions, local authorities will be required to produce a strategy for the teaching of these subjects for submission to the Scottish Executive.

Head teachers will be given much greater responsibility by this Act, in recognition of their superior ability to decide how to run their own school. We will support their right to impose their own governance on a school. They should be responsible for discipline – where standards have plummeted in the last 10 years – and for the implementation of a school uniform policy. They should be allowed to set classes according to pupil standards, a method which has been proven time and time again to benefit both the brightest pupils and those who are struggling to keep up. They should have increased control over the curriculum, subject of course to national strategic guidelines and compliance with HMI, and we would encourage them to invest time and resource in strengthening extra-curricular activity. We will also require head teachers to have a programme for the continued professional development (CPD) of their teaching staff. The provision of this might involve teachers, local authorities and teaching unions, and would include any teacher counselling and support which was required. Certain other professions require annual evidence of CPD engagement as a condition of continued right to practice and we think such CPD engagement should be a requirement for continued registration as a teacher. The Act will also empower heads to retain an administrative budget competence, which will enable them to bid

directly to the Scottish Executive to finance specific projects which they want to see take place at their school.

Head teachers need to be able to make their mark at their school. They deserve to earn a reputation based on how they run their school, without the accountability gap which exists at present. We'll give them even more room for success by prohibiting the arbitrary capping of school places before a school has reached its full capacity, providing there is proven demand for places. The best schools will be full schools.

We also recognise the pivotal role played by parents as partners in a top-quality education system. That's why we will reinstate school boards. The Lib-Lab Pact scrapped school boards, against the wishes of parents and teachers, furthering their centralist education agenda. We believe that as much power as possible should be in the hands of parents, who know better than anyone else the needs of their children. School boards were popular and successful, and under the Conservatives, they'll be back.

There are other simple yet effective steps a local authority can take to improve schooling for pupils and parents. We would encourage local authorities to consider implementing a 'yellow school bus' programme. Particularly useful for parents with primary school-age children, this would involve collecting pupils and dropping them off at the end of the school day. This would have an important dual benefit. Firstly, it would reduce car use by parents who would ordinarily drive their children to school, which would cut carbon emissions. Secondly, and most importantly, child safety would improve due to reduced traffic at the school gates.

Special Schools and Specialist Schools

Not all children are suited to mainstream education. This can be for a variety of reasons: a physical disability or learning difficulty, outstanding sporting or musical potential, or another vocational calling. There must be a place for this type of schooling in the Scottish education system, and under the Conservatives there will be.

Parents of children with such educational needs have a very difficult job in life. In many cases, they dedicate most of their time to making life easier for their family. They deserve some help from their government and their council. That includes being given some choice over how their child is educated. Some parents would like to see their child taught in a mainstream school, and others would prefer a special school. They should be allowed to exercise this choice entirely freely. We will ensure that parents have a proper and reasonable choice, taking account of the circumstances, between a mainstream school and a special school. And for those who opt for a special school after

confirmation that it suits their child's needs, we will ensure that there are always sufficient funded places to meet demand.

We will also support a pilot scheme for a city academy in Glasgow. If this is successful, it will pave the way for the roll out of various schools specialising in vocational skills, music, drama, arts, sport, science, or anything else for which there is demand.

Schools are for children and young adults benefiting from committed and dedicated professionals. They are not an environment for interference and direction by politicians. Our proposals recognise and respect that.

A Brighter Future for Universities and Colleges

Scotland's universities and colleges continue to perform to an internationally renowned standard. We are right to be proud of them, and we support them, wholeheartedly. However, Conservatives worry about their future, both with regard to finance and independence.

The immediate concern is a financial one. The introduction of top-up tuition fees in England has opened up a new revenue stream for them which Scottish universities simply cannot match. The gap is large and increasing, and it is putting the financial security of our institutions at significant risk. In response, Conservatives will hold a root and branch review, with a commission investigating the future funding of both our universities and our colleges.

Our commission would investigate the issue of student debt and finance. We would ask it to consider the effectiveness of commercialising the student loan book in order to expand the amount of financial assistance available for students. We do believe that there are great benefits derived from the possession of a degree. A person's earning potential can be expected to disproportionately inflate in comparison to someone who has not been to university. Therefore, we do not have any particular difficulty with the idea of a student contributing towards the cost of their education. The ability of a person – regardless of their background – to borrow as much money as they need to complete their course, safe in the knowledge that the earnings threshold for paying back their loan would be set much higher than it is at present, is the basis of a sound system for student finance.

The second major issue facing our universities is their autonomy from the government. Politicians are too quick to interfere in the governance of universities and colleges. It is utterly unacceptable, because the independence of governance of these institutions is the very reason why they continue to thrive. We shall end all unnecessary central direction and interference in their activities.

Our approach to education at all levels is straight-forward. The less political interference, and the more professional autonomy, the better. We will put this into practice.

A HEALTHIER SCOTLAND

- Saving the NHS
- The Waiting's Over
- Action on Dentistry
- Time to Tackle Mental Health

The most basic service a nation must provide to its citizens is healthcare. And the quality of a health service says a lot about a nation. A world-class health service can be the sign of a nation which knows where its priorities lie. Anything less can be a sign of a nation which has lost its way, and which is reluctant to make the changes required to improve the life of its people.

Conservatives want Scotland to have a world-class National Health Service, but wanting to be the best is just the beginning. In order to actually have the best NHS possible, we must first accept that at the moment, we do not. Despite attracting excellent, dedicated staff and health professionals, we have a healthcare system which, while excellent in many respects, too often provides a poor service to our people.

This is not for lack of money. The increase in the funding of the NHS in the last 10 years has been enormous. However, it has not been accompanied by the necessary reforms. The Lib-Lab Pact has been content to claim success on the basis that it has poured money into the health service. But without improved results this is not a success – it is a failure. An unforgivable failure, confirmed by the fact that in the last 9 years the median inpatient waiting time has increased by 14 days, and the median outpatient waiting time by 8 days. An unforgivable failure, further confirmed by the fact that hospitals all over Scotland built up by the Conservatives, have been run down by Labour. An unforgivable failure, reinforced by the fact that fewer than half of the Scottish population is registered with a dentist, despite paying their taxes for the provision of dentistry. An unforgivable failure, highlighted by the fact that there are inadequate services for the one in four Scots predicted to suffer from mental ill health at some point in their lives.

This is not a record to be proud of. The people of Scotland are entitled to wonder where all this money has gone, and why they are still waiting for immediate access to quality, local health services. Conservatives are passionate supporters of the NHS. We want to see it thrive, and be a beacon of national pride. That's why we want to change it, to improve it, and to make it work better for the people it serves. It is too easy for politicians to become caught up in dogma and processes in deliberations over the NHS. We will not do that. All

that matters – and all that patients are interested in – is the quality and proximity of care. Scottish communities need local health facilities. Conservatives will not lose sight of that.

Saving the NHS

Conservatives have a proud record of building up healthcare facilities. Whilst in government, we built up and supported facilities the length and breadth of Scotland, including St John's in Livingston, Caithness General in Wick, Ayr, Stirling Royal Infirmary, the Queen Margaret in Dunfermline, Falkirk Royal, the Western Isles Hospital, the Perth Royal Infirmary, Forth Park, Monklands, Inverclyde, Vale of Leven District Hospital, and the Western Infirmary, the Victoria Infirmary and the Queen Mother's in Glasgow. They were successful units serving local people, and they have been run down by Labour.

The Lib-Lab Pact is on a mission to centralise Scotland's health service. The NHS – already largely controlled by politicians – is now at the mercy of bureaucrats and ideology to a greater extent than ever before. It is this agenda which is depriving local people of what they desire – an array of quality healthcare services close to home.

Proximity to home is the most important factor for acute services like accident and emergency and maternity units. In situations where acute services are required, we are all eternally grateful to the staff in the NHS. It is in these circumstances that the NHS is most vital – it is literally a lifeline for men, women, children and babies in need of urgent attention. For this reason, the closure of many of these units by the Scottish Executive is utterly negligent. We will pledge to do everything possible to preserve such facilities. We will work towards a new minimum standard, leaving people secure in the knowledge that they have local accident and emergency services and maternity provision within easy reach.

For less serious cases which nonetheless require medical attention, Scotland used to have an effective out-of-hours GP service. This has ended in recent years, after a deal was struck which benefited almost every vested interest imaginable, but has reduced the quality of patient care. The NHS 24 system has proved to be utterly inadequate. A telephone simply doesn't match up to the service given in person by a GP – a service which is much harder to receive, and far more expensive to provide, under the new arrangements. We will hold an immediate review of NHS 24 with a view to investigating alternative methods of delivery, including local centres led by local clinicians.

The Waiting's Over

The requirements for world-class elective care are different to those for acute care. Whilst proximity of care takes precedence in acute

procedures, patient choice has more of a role to play in elective procedures.

The present system of healthcare in Scotland leaves too much power in the hands of politicians and bureaucrats and not enough in the hands of GPs and patients. Conservatives will rebalance the system in the other direction.

Elective procedures are generally not a matter of immediate life or death. It is for these procedures, for example hip replacements, that there can be lengthy waiting lists. Politicians and bureaucrats dictate to clinicians and their patients the time and place of an operation, with no meaningful patient input. It is this which we believe is wrong. If a hospital in the neighbouring district can do an operation more quickly, why shouldn't the patient be allowed to choose to go there? Or if there is another hospital able to provide the operation which is nearer the patient's family, why can't they take that option over the one they've been allocated? And if a patient believes an alternative hospital is cleaner than the one they're been told to go to, why can't he or she change? Patients have paid their taxes to provide this service, and they should have a say over how and where it is delivered.

We will give patients that choice. In consultation with GPs, patients will be able to choose from a menu of hospitals which can perform the relevant procedure. The money for performing the operation would be funded by the government, and would pass to the hospital. This money-follows-patient system, which would be based on national tariffs for procedures, would have two key benefits. First and foremost, the patient would benefit from having a choice over their care. Secondly, with no guarantee of receiving every local patient, a healthcare provider would have to raise its game in order to attract patients. This healthy competition would increase the overall standard of care, encourage productivity and innovation, and lead to the reduction, and eventual elimination, of waiting lists.

There would be losers from this change – the bureaucrats and politicians who would have much less responsibility over our healthcare and our choices, no longer able to set meaningless targets designed to make them look as though they do a worthwhile job. However, we believe that the focus should be on the winners – patients who simply want faster treatment, and the health professionals, who want to get on with their jobs but are constantly impeded by interfering pen-pushers.

There would be other significant beneficiaries from a tariff-based system. Communities all over Scotland which are facing cuts, or threats of cuts, in their local healthcare would no longer be at the mercy of a political whim. Any healthcare facility for which there was demand, borne out by people exercising their choice to use it, would

remain open and viable. If any units closed, it would only be those which were not performing to a high enough standard to attract patients.

Conservatives recognise that the need for many elective procedures is caused by circumstances outwith the patient's control. Nonetheless, we must also accept that some procedures are required as a result of the patient's own lifestyle choices. We are greatly concerned about the poor level of public health in Scotland, which in this case truly is the 'sick man of Europe'. Public and private agencies, as well as individuals, need to work together to improve this woeful record.

There is no doubt that personal and social responsibility play a role. Individuals have a responsibility to themselves, and to the taxpayers who ultimately will pay for their treatment, to look after themselves, maintain a healthy diet and take regular exercise. However, the government and its agencies also have a role to play. Politicians must not be seen to be preaching on this issue – nobody wants to live in a nanny state where people are criticised for enjoying themselves. Instead, we would like to see a more personalised message on public health being delivered by schools to their young pupils, and by GPs to the wider community. Scotland has to change its habits. We must do it together.

Action on Dentistry

There is perhaps no better example of Scots receiving a raw deal than in the provision of dentistry. Scottish taxpayers pay for that provision, yet fewer than half of the Scottish population is registered with a dentist, and almost 50,000 fewer children are registered than was the case when the Lib-Lab Pact came to office. This has happened under its watch and it must take responsibility.

Dentists have been left with few options. Because of their fee structure, the money they receive from the government for procedures performed on NHS patients is so inadequate that they are unable to run viable practices offering a reasonable financial return. We now have dentists who have either reduced their proportion of NHS patients or ceased taking them altogether. Dentists are not seeking that outcome, nor are patients. It is an outcome forced upon them by the politicians who decide on the structure of dentistry.

We will change it for the better. We will liaise with the dental profession on the best way forward to give the Scottish public the services they have already paid for in their taxation.

One of the major problems is a lack of dentists, and whilst we need to encourage more, there is another solution which could ease the current pressure on the dental system. Dental therapists provide a

crucial service to assist dentists in clinics all over the country. One of the most important functions they perform is the treatment of children, which their training qualifies them to do. This helps to free up time for the dentist to see adult patients in need.

Dental hygienists do equally crucial work. However, many of them want to do more, and Conservatives want to offer them a career path to do so. We will provide £10m per annum to allow for dental hygienists to be trained to therapist level in order that they can perform treatment on children. With sufficiently increased numbers, we will ensure that they go direct to schools in mobile dental units to check children's teeth, and if necessary treat them, on site. It is crucial for the oral health of future generations to educate them on the need for regular, good brushing and care of teeth, and there is no better way to convey that message than to take it direct to schools. With the added benefit of freeing up even more dentists' time to treat adults currently denied access to the system, this will make a significant improvement to our dental service.

Time to Tackle Mental Health

Mental ill-health is a problem which has long been ignored by politicians of all parties and by people from all walks of life. The pervading attitude that mental illness affects only a small number of people and that these people simply need to 'pull themselves together' has been a very unfortunate misconception. This attitude has stigmatised these sufferers and delayed true recognition of their condition. However, figures showing that one in four Scots will suffer from mental illness at some stage of their lives indicate the seriousness of this problem. That's why the treatment of mental illness is at the core of a Conservative vision for Scotland.

We have allocated an extra £10m in our budget which will be used exclusively to improve treatment and services for people with a mental health problem. We value the role played by the voluntary sector and by social enterprises in every area of Scottish life, none more so than by those organisations which help the mentally ill. We will use them extensively to help develop a much broader range of services for people affected by mental illness. The voluntary sector will be the driving force behind the provision of support, which will be as widely available as possible. Depression doesn't just strike during the working week, and if a person needs support on a Sunday night, or at any other time, help should be to hand. We will also relieve the pressure on the voluntary sector by guaranteeing their funding stream for a period of 5 years at a time, so that they have the financial security to pursue any avenue required to help sufferers.

There is no doubt that such an ambitious programme will require more training for health and social care staff. Our new funding stream will supply that.

As with all types of health treatment, we must minimise the time that patients have to wait before being seen. At present, only waiting times for physical health procedures are recorded, with no waiting times system for mental health treatment. We will rectify this by putting in place a register of how long people have to wait before receiving counselling or psychological care.

People with mental health issues have so much to contribute to Scotland and to society. We must help them realise their potential. It is our obligation to help them, heal them, and get them back to enjoying themselves and making the most of life.

A VOICE FOR RURAL SCOTLAND

- Rural Scotland's Public Services
- Helping Small Businesses; Improving Tourism
- Rural Scotland's Primary Industries

At the heart of the Lib-Lab Pact lies a total lack of understanding of the needs of rural Scotland. As a result, metropolitan politicians have often made decisions designed to benefit urban areas and have paid little regard to the effect that those decisions have had on rural areas. When metropolitan politicians decree that we need to reduce car use, they ignore the fact that for rural Scots cars are a necessity, not a luxury. And when they centralise health services in the big cities, they put rural lives in danger and claim it as an efficiency saving.

It's time rural Scotland got a fair deal from their government. Conservatives best understand the needs of rural Scotland. We know that there need be no contradiction between serving people in cities as well as serving people in the country. We also know that the concerns of rural dwellers are not focused exclusively on farming, fishing and crofting. Most rural people's everyday concerns are crime, drugs, hospitals and housing. We understand that all of these are important. We are the true voice of rural Scotland.

Rural Scotland's Public Services

Just like people who live in the cities, the people of Scotland's countryside are not getting value for money from the taxes they pay. For their substantial tax bills they deserve better provision of education, health services, and housing, a greater level of safety in their villages and towns, and more guarantees over the future of basic services like their Post Office.

Rural schools have an excellent record of producing good results and giving Scotland top-class school leavers and university graduates. We want to see this continue. However, this record will not be maintained if the current policy of closing rural schools persists. That's why we will set up a £5m annual Rural Schools Support Fund. This fund will be for the exclusive purpose of supporting schools earmarked for closure by the local authority, in spite of opposition from pupils, parents and teachers.

We will oppose the centralisation of the health service, and where it has contributed to poorer facilities for rural people, we will seek to reverse it. Everyone – no matter where they live – deserves to be in relatively close proximity to healthcare. This includes the provision of accident and emergency services, and other acute services like

maternity provision. Furthermore, we will hold an immediate review of NHS 24 and out-of-hours care in order to investigate ways to better deliver this service to rural areas.

We also realise that crime does not stop at the boundaries of Scotland's cities. Rural crime is a serious problem. Our policy to hire more police officers, to get them out in communities, to build more prison space and to demand the fit and proper punishment of criminals will benefit rural areas just as much as urban ones. People in rural Scotland deserve to go about their lives free from crime and the fear of crime every bit as much as urban people do.

The lack of affordable housing is a major problem in rural areas, caused mainly by a lack of supply. Our wish for a more fluid planning system along with our Affordable Homes Trusts will relieve this problem.

Helping Small Businesses; Improving Tourism

Rural areas depend on the success of small and medium sized local businesses. They supply larger businesses throughout the country, promote local food and produce, and employ local workers. We need to ensure that they are adequately supported, because if they succumb to the pressure of doing business in the age of the supermarket and the internet, the loss at the heart of rural communities will be irreplaceable.

Our proposals to cut business rates will help. Many of the small businesses which characterise rural areas will pay no business rates at all under Conservative proposals. Rural towns will also have the chance to benefit from our £20m annual Town Centre Regeneration Fund, which for many areas could prove to be a saviour, literally.

Working with our colleagues at Westminster, we will attempt to have the supermarkets' Code of Conduct strengthened so that local producers receive a fairer price for their goods. Without this, there is a real danger that they will go out of business. Nonetheless, we also believe that part of the solution lies in the hands of the producers themselves. So we would advocate and incentivise the use of co-operatives which will increase their bargaining power.

There are other steps we can take to promote local produce. Our new Scottish Public Procurement Unit will work within the current European Union rules to promote the use of local food by local people, and we will encourage farmers' markets and other showcasing. We will also attempt to ease planning guidelines on rural housing, which will offer farmers the option of receiving capital profit by selling some land for housing.

We must never forget the principal role of tourism. Tourism is a lifeline for rural communities and rural economies. The natural beauty of Scotland's rural environment goes a long way to securing the tourist trade, and our proposals on business rates and local regeneration, especially our Town Centre Regeneration Fund, will further support tourism. We will also review the operation of visitscotland.com. It is clear that many small and rural businesses seek changes to the website, and in acknowledgement of this we would take the first possible opportunity to ensure that it is a flexible site which benefits all businesses, large and small, urban and rural. And we'll assist further by encouraging agencies and interested parties to promote rural field sports, which can bring real benefits to rural economies, and rural life.

Rural Scotland's Primary Industries

We are completely committed to the maintenance and progression of rural Scotland's primary industries, like farming, crofting, forestry and fishing. These industries have always been a major part of rural life, and a major part of Scottish culture, and we hope they always will be.

Conservatives want to encourage new entrants into farming. We will introduce Starter Unit Pilot Schemes (SUPS) in order to attract new blood into the industry. Young farmers, of course, are the future of the industry, and we will create a one-stop-shop for them to access the initiative. We would ensure that the new farmer was granted a percentage of the capital required to get going, decreasing over a 5 year period, and would ensure that the retiring farmer was involved and able to input his expertise in the process. We have allocated £5m to fund these pilot schemes.

We realise, however, that SUPS will not be enough on its own, as one of the main difficulties facing aspiring new entrants is the lack of available land. So, in addition, we would free up the tenanted sector by supporting industry led initiatives. The agricultural holdings legislation has utterly failed to do this, and if necessary we will review it to ensure a flexible system of land tenure which benefits owners and tenants alike. Crucially, we will also work to relax planning guidelines, so that housing can be developed in rural locations, helping to service the accommodation needs of retiring farmers.

Not only do we encourage farming, but we encourage good and efficient farming. The recent reform of the CAP, though dramatic, is not sustainable in the long term. During the 2008 'Health Check' we will work with colleagues at Westminster to ensure full decoupling of support across all EU countries, the end of the absurd support for tobacco, the end of set aside and a phasing out of export subsidies. We are totally committed to supporting more vulnerable areas through

the Less Favoured Area payment, in recognition of the particular difficulties these farmers face.

We also have concerns over the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP). We have led the way in recent years in advocating sensible, sustainable solutions for the future of the Scottish white-fish industry. We continue to do so. The CFP has been an economic, political, social and ecological catastrophe. It has decimated many rural communities in Scotland, and has worked directly against the aim of stock conservation.

Our fisheries policy has three aims: to encourage sustainable fishing communities, to avoid placing excessive burdens on tax payers and to enrich and protect the environment. We believe that we can best achieve them if more control over Scotland's waters resides here in Scotland. So we will strenuously support a future Conservative Government in their attempts to win more national, regional and local control over fisheries to the benefit of the environment, sustainable fish stocks, consumers and fishing communities and will look at all possible ways of achieving this.

Much like Scotland in general, rural areas suffer from excessive government interference. It has often come in the form of a spreading of the quango culture. We are now concerned that the very existence of some arms-length government bodies is stifling rural development and setting back rural progress. That's why we will be holding a series of fundamental reviews into the roles and remits of bodies like SNH, SEPA, the Forestry Commission, Forest Enterprise and the Scottish Agricultural Wages Board. We will also review the operation of the Farm Woodlands Grant Scheme in order to ensure that it delivers the agreed forestry targets. Furthermore, we must ensure that any agreed timber transport network does not land-lock harvestable timber.

At other times, government interference has manifested itself in the inappropriate placement of on-shore wind farm developments designed to meet central objectives made in Edinburgh. We will place a moratorium on all locally-opposed wind farm developments pending a National Location Strategy for such developments. This will complement our proposals to incentivise other forms of renewable energy, like tidal power and biomass.