

Alex's Standard 5

January/February
Edition



Friends,

A Happy New Year to you all and welcome to the January edition of Alex's Standard, my regular newsletter for Central Scotland. I hope you all enjoyed the Festive Season and that this New Year will be a good one for you.

I hope you find the latest edition of the Standard of interest. I know that this is the first copy that many of you have received so I hope you too enjoy it. If you wish to receive future editions then please use the contact information on the back page to get in touch and request such.

I have included articles on issues of the day that I believe are of major importance and details of some of the work I have been involved in recently.

As usual, if you have any questions or if you would like to contact me about a particular issue, then please do not hesitate to get in touch. Remember that I am here to help.

*Best wishes,
Alex Neil MSP*

Support the
Firefighters

In the recent dispute between the government and the Fire Brigades Union, Alex has been soundly on the side of the firefighters. Back in late November Alex visited firefighters at Hamilton Fire Station to let them know that he was fully behind them in their demand for decent pay. He has also been in contact with officials from the Fire Brigades Union offering any help that he can.

To demonstrate his support Alex placed a motion before the Scottish Parliament that called upon MSPs to recognise the valuable and courageous work undertaken by our firefighters. The motion also sought to ensure that they, as well as emergency fire control staff are paid better wages in the future, that more accurately reflect the high level of skills they have as well as the tremendous contribution to society they provide.

Alex's motion was debated in Parliament on 19th December, with the MSPs contributing broadly agreeing with its sentiments. The task now is to put pressure on the Westminster Government in London to ensure that they understand that the people of Scotland value and cherish their firefighters and want to see them adequately paid. This is an issue that has moved many of Alex's constituents to get in touch stating that they support the firefighters and Alex has been in touch with each and every one of them to assure them that he too supports them.

Of course no one wanted to see the firefighters on strike, least of all the firefighters themselves, but by the inaction of the Westminster Government they have basically been pushed to this recourse of action. The attitude of some towards our firefighters has been disgraceful,

and much of the language employed deplorable, especially that used by government ministers. They have been castigated and variously described as loony-lefties, Scargillites, militants, and perhaps most scandalously of all as fascists. None of these terms could be further from the truth of course. In reality the men and women involved in the dispute are merely seeking the best possible deal for themselves and their families, a point which Alex has been consistent in making.

Also of great concern is the Westminster Government's proposal for 'modernisation' of the Fire Service, which in reality means, a massive downsizing of the service, i.e. job losses and the closure of stations. This has been combined with the government arguing that the Fire Brigades Union is opposed to modernisation. Alex has been in contact with the union and knows that their actual stance is a very sensible one of **yes to modernisation** but **no to downsizing**.



Firemen deserve our Support

We should remember the stressful and dangerous jobs that firefighters do on our behalf. Let us never forget that when the rest of us are running out of a burning building these brave individuals are running in, risking life and limb to save members of the public. We should hope for all our sakes that this new year will mean a new improved deal for our firefighters. They deserve nothing less than our full support at this time.

PFI is Not Value for Money

You may remember from previous editions of *The Standard* how we have shown the real cost of the Private Finance Initiative (PFI). For example, in the last edition we told you how it will cost the tax payer £520 million over the next 30 years to pay for the new Hairmyres Hospital in East Kilbride. This is money going directly into the pockets of private sector fat cats who have paid only £67 million towards the construction of the hospital. In other words the private sector makes a tidy profit of £453 million at the public's expense. Nice work if you can get it!



Hairmyres...paid for with PFI

It is not only in the health service that PFI has been used. PFI projects have been wide and varied in the education sector also. *The Standard* has previously highlighted some of the ways in which this has changed our schools for the worse. For example, where once schools could be used as community centres after school hours (for youth group meetings for example) this is going to be less likely with PFI schools. Also, many are already finding that the cost of hiring out school halls or school playing fields in PFI schools is significantly higher than it previously was. This is a clear example of the money grabbing attitude of some of those in charge of these PFI ventures, and already we are seeing a divergence of school from the community it serves. This is not the way it should be. Local schools should be at the very heart of their community and there are clear

signs that PFI is eroding this valuable link.

Since our last edition though, the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) has estimated that only 6% of PFI projects completed by Central and Local Government have had any independent research to see if they are value for money. The IPPR have also come out to say that it is doubtful if there are financial benefits to PFI projects in the Health and Education Sectors.

None the less the Scottish Executive is still ploughing ahead with PFI projects up and down the country. It is now clearer than ever that the motivation behind PFI is ideological. The Scottish Executive had previously claimed that it is value for money that has driven their commitment to PFI, but the findings of the IPPR show this is plainly not the case. If it was value for money that was the motivation then surely there would have been a thorough process of auditing PFI schemes to see whether or not they did represent better value. This has not happened.

PFI is purely about lining the pockets of private sector fat cats with public money. In other words, your cash goes directly out of the public sector and into the private sector purse. True value for money would be the public sector borrowing money for projects where necessary, at much more favourable rates. This would ensure continued public control and ownership of public assets and put an end to the back door privatisation that PFI represents.

PFI Fact

Scotland has spent over £2.7 billion on PFI projects so far but the taxpayer will have to pay the private sector back £12.3 billion over the course of the contracts. **That's more than 4 times the original cost!**

Homelessness in Scotland too High

The issue of homelessness remains a huge one for Scotland today. In 2001-2002 there were over 46,000 applications from households to Local Authorities to be considered homeless. Across the two Lanarkshire Authorities alone there were 7,500 applications. The numbers in temporary accommodation is also alarming. Between June 2001 and June 2002 the number of households housed in such a manner had risen to 4,419, a rise of over 10% over the period. In Falkirk alone there was a staggering 93% increase in the numbers housed in temporary accommodation. It is clear then that homelessness is a continuing issue of concern across the country.

Alex has been consistent in trying to highlight the issue of homelessness and believes that more can be done to try and find everyone in Scotland a home to call their own. Shelter Scotland argues that 60,000 extra new houses should be built over the next 5 years and Alex totally supports this vital measure. It is clear that today there are just not enough houses being built across the county as compared with days gone by. For example in 1976 36,527 new houses were built in Scotland, but by 2001 that figure was down to only 23,713. This represents a staggering decline in new build of almost 13,000, clear evidence that fewer new homes are being built for people.

Clear and decisive action must be taken urgently to provide everyone in Scotland with a roof over his or her head. In the 21st Century it is a disgrace that homelessness on the scale we have is still with us. A massive programme of investment into house building must begin sooner rather than later.

In Brief

Agency Nurses Alex discovered in November that the Lanarkshire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust spent 107% more on hiring agency nurses in April 2001-March 2002 than it had the previous year. He argues this money would be better spent on giving existing nurses a wage increase and recruiting new full-time nurses to the NHS rather than using public money to hire agency staff. **Agency Nurses cost much more to hire than full-time nurses, sometimes as much as 9 times more.**

Carers You may, or may not have known, but 3rd December 2002 was Carers' Rights Day, and Alex took the time to highlight the wonderful work done by the 650,000 people who care for someone else in Scotland. He also called on all carers to make sure they are claiming all the benefits that they are entitled to, as many carers often do not realise that they are due more support.

Know your History Alex recently discovered that North Lanarkshire Council had been distributing a wall chart for history pupils with inaccurate information on it. The poster ludicrously stated that after 1066 William the Conqueror ruled Scotland, when of course he didn't and that the Act of Union took place in 1706, when it was in fact the following year. He has written to the Chief Executive of the Council requesting that all posters are withdrawn immediately as it is vital that our school children are given correct information for the sake of their education.

Centre for Deaf Studies Alex has also been active in other areas recently. He has backed the Scottish Association of Sign Language Interpreters call for the creation of a Scottish Centre for Deaf Studies to offer true social inclusion to deaf and deafblind people.

Mis-selling of Energy Alex spoke in a debate in the Scottish Parliament in November on the issue of mis-selling in the energy sector. All too often we are seeing people's electricity and gas supply switched without their consent. This leads to a lot of hassle and stress for those involved and Alex is calling for greater regulation of the energy suppliers to try and end the mis-selling of energy supply.

Council's raw deal Alex recently highlighted the raw deal that North Lanarkshire Council was getting from the Scottish Executive. From 2003-2006, North Lanarkshire will get a smaller increase to their block grant than the average increase. Whilst Scottish Local Authorities are getting an across the board 9% increase this is not at the same rate in each area, with North Lanarkshire getting an 8.7% increase. Whilst it may not seem worthwhile quibbling over 0.3% it is worth noting that this represents around £1 million. It is worth bearing in mind that this is money that could be going to hard pressed local services such as schools, libraries and so on.

Lifelong Learning

In his capacity as chair of the Scottish Parliament's Enterprise and Lifelong Learning Committee it was up to Alex to open on the recent debate in the Parliament on his Committee's report on their recent Lifelong Learning Inquiry. The report has been well received from all quarters and is designed to bring all sectors involved in Lifelong Learning (the business community, the educators and students) together. The reason for this is that our education system is best served by a co-ordinated approach involving all these groups. This will hopefully ensure people can access that system at any stage of life.

Alex well understands the need for a co-ordinated approach to lifelong learning and education in general. Alex was the first ever member of the Neil family to attend university and could only do so with support from the state, in terms of having his fees paid and being in receipt of a grant. He understands how vital it is therefore to try and include as many people as is possible in the education system, and that the only way to ensure this is by having genuine lifelong learning, so that any person can access the system at any point in their lives. It is also vital for the health of the country as a whole.



A Graduation ceremony takes place... hopefully a more newer folk to higher education will experience this in the future

As we have reported before in *The Standard*, Scotland is currently experiencing a dramatic decline in population, with some figures estimating that there will be about 4.5 million resident in Scotland by

2040, down from the present 5 million. This can be in some part, put down to the lack of opportunities here in Scotland today. The Lifelong Learning Report recognised this in some part by suggesting that the modern apprenticeship programme be redesigned to help fill the gaps in areas where there is a shortage of trained workers but no shortage of demand (the building trade, or plumbers for example). This will help ease the tide of people leaving Scotland, by providing greater opportunities at home. It is vital for the future health of the nation that we stem the numbers of people leaving Scotland.

The Scottish Executive is due to respond to the report soon. It is hoped that they will take on board much of what is contained within. All who helped contribute to its compilation have been pleased with the final report, and they are the ones involved in the education sector (teaching staff, students and the business community). It points the way to achieving a true culture of lifelong learning, something that will potentially benefit us all.

Contacting *The Standard*:

If you would like to get in touch with us to tell us of an issue you believe is of importance, or for any reason at all then please fill in this section and send it to one of the contact addresses on the next page.

Name
Address.....
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.....Postcode.....

Would like to receive future copies of *The Standard*?

Yes No

I have an issue that I would like to bring to Alex Neil MSP's attention:
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Alex Highlights Problem of Debt

The problem of debt is a massive one for our country. Citizens Advice Scotland have said that they received about 60,000 new debt enquiries in 2001-02, on top of the 160,000 on going enquiries. East Kilbride Citizens Advice report that as much as 26% of all enquiries they received in the same period were to do with debt, whilst there were over 4,000 enquiries about debt to the Citizens Advice Bureaux in Motherwell, Hamilton and Bellshill.

Alex is urging those involved in the provision of loans to be more responsible in the marketing of them. All too often those targeted are those already in financial difficulties. It simply fails to make sense to push those already in debt further into debt. Consideration might also be given to educating young people at school the value of managing their money, so that they don't run into debt problems in adult life.

Alex also has a proposal for a Bank Arrestment Bill in the pipeline at the Scottish Parliament. This would introduce a similar system to that of Wage Arrestment. Currently when someone has their wages arrested they are given a small portion of them to live on. When they have their bank account arrested they are left with nothing, pushing many into poverty. Alex's proposal would ensure that this wouldn't happen and people would be left with money to live on.

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Independence... Best for Scotland



Alex Neil, SNP MSP for Central Scotland spells out here why he believes that independence is best for Scotland.

Scotland has come a long way in a short time. After years of struggle for some form of home rule, in 1999 we finally saw the establishment of the first Scottish Parliament since the Act of Union in 1707. The Parliament we have is able to legislate on matters of significant interest to us all: health, education and transport to name but a few. This means that we are able to legislate in some areas and make some difference in Scotland.

However, it must be remembered that it is only some and not all areas that the Parliament can deal with. Defence, Pensions, Benefits, Taxation and most of the really important decisions about Scotland are still made in London. This means that whilst the Scottish Parliament can make some difference to our lives it cannot make a real impact and put through the measures necessary to make a big difference. Only **independence** will ever be able to achieve this.

I supported the establishment of the current devolved Scottish Parliament as a stepping stone to better things, for the drive to **independence**. I believe that now is the time to take that next step, as we face many problems in Scotland that can only be dealt with through giving the Scottish Parliament the powers of a normal

independent parliament. Scotland today has one in three children born into poverty, a stalling economy and a rapidly declining population. All of these problems need urgent action, but currently the Scottish Parliament cannot really affect these areas. Only with **independence** can we try and lift our people out of poverty, kick start our economy and try and put in place the sort of society that not only will our people no longer feel the need to walk away from, but which people will want to return. The longer we leave Scotland's problems unchecked the greater these problems will become. **The time for independence is now.**

INDEPENDENCE...THE FACTS

1) All too often it is said that Scotland is too small to be an independent country. In fact Scotland is an average sized nation, bigger than many other independent European countries.

	Population
Scotland	5 million
Finland	5 million
Republic of Ireland	4 million
Estonia	1.4million
Luxembourg	0.4 million
Iceland	0.3 million

2) We often hear that Scotland is too poor to be an independent country. In fact, **from 1979 to 1997 Scotland sent £27 billion more to London than we received back.** This is money that could have been invested in our schools, hospitals and infrastructure.

3) Another lie about Scotland is that we would have less influence in international affairs if we were independent. In fact if we were independent we would have our own seat in the United Nations, and would also have closer to 15 members of the European Parliament rather than the current 8 that we have now. **Our voice would be stronger with independence.**