

Salmond uses best childcare policy to woo voters - again ^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

ALEX Salmond has promised that Scotland will have the most generous childcare system in the UK as he set out a series of practical ideas designed to woo voters in May's local-council elections.

Yesterday, the First Minister announced at the SNP party conference that the forthcoming Children's Bill would include a legal guarantee of 600 hours of free nursery education per year for every aged child aged three and four from 2014. The current provision is 475 hours spread over the 38 weeks of the school year. In England, the level is being raised to 570 hours from April.

However, Labour claimed the First Minister had been caught trying to recycle an old pledge which he had conspicuously failed to deliver in the past.

The 2007 SNP manifesto vowed to "increase the provision of free nursery education for three- and four-year-olds by 50%. That means increasing the entitlement from 400 hours a year to 600 hours a year". But by the end of the last parliament, just two of Scotland's 32 councils had hit the target, both Labour.

Neil Bibby MSP, Labour's spokesman on young people's issues, said: "Alex Salmond has been caught out. He made this exact promise five years ago and the only two places close to delivering it are Glasgow and East Renfrewshire's Labour councils. Why should parents believe him this time round?"

"The cost of childcare in Scotland is way higher than the rest of the UK and Alex Salmond should be ashamed that he cancelled Labour's ground-breaking scheme for childcare for vulnerable two-year-olds days after coming into office."

The childcare plan - a clear attempt to woo women voters - which would start just weeks before the 2014 independence referendum, was the centrepiece of Salmond's speech to around 900 delegates at the SNP spring conference in Glasgow.

Listing what the SNP was already doing for families, Salmond said that in the last parliament, his minority government had moved from 412 hours a year to 475 hours of childcare, benefiting 100,000 children a year in the process.

"Now we intend to move further and to place it in statute so that families in every part of Scotland can share in the benefit," he said.

"We will place into the new Children's Bill introduced to parliament next year a statutory guarantee of over 600 hours of free nursery education for every Scottish three- and four-year-old, and for every looked-after two-year-old in our land.

"The best package of free nursery education on offer anywhere in the UK - a statement of faith and commitment to the future.

"For every young mum or dad juggling work and parenthood, our message is clear: the SNP is here for your family."

Salmond's aides were later unable to say how much the new policy would cost, saying it would be a matter for future negotiations - a sign that councils may be expected to pick up part of the bill.

With the local elections less than eight weeks away, on May 3, and Glasgow a key target, the First Minister also announced new projects linked to the Glasgow 2014 Commonwealth Games.

He said £5 million would be used to ensure 2500 young people were helped into work through the Games and other international and national events being hosted in Scotland over the next three years. There would also be a £10m Games legacy fund for communities to upgrade local sports facilities.

Besides the pre-election give-aways, Salmond also set out a key plank of SNP strategy in the run-up to the independence referendum.

Citing Holyrood's existing control over the health service, education and police, he tried to re-brand devolution by claiming that Scotland was already independent in some respects, and now needed to go the whole hog.

"With a measure of independence on health, education and on law and order we have made Scotland a better place. Think what we could do with Scottish control of the economy, or international representation and of our security."

The argument that independence would be a beneficial extension of existing powers rather a radical constitutional break was aimed at the 20% of the electorate which SNP strategists call "persuadables" - the swing voters who will be critical in the referendum.

"The lesson is a simple one," said Salmond. "A little independence has been good for Scotland. But real independence will be even better."

Salmond also made repeated attacks on David Cameron and the Conservatives at Westminster, suggesting he wants the referendum to be a popularity contest between himself and the Prime Minister.

But Scottish Conservatives leader Ruth Davidson said: "The people of Scotland will not be fooled by Alex Salmond's bluster. The simple truth is that the referendum will be a vote between separation and devolution, no matter how the SNP attempt to dress it up.

"People are asking for hard facts about a separate Scotland's place in Europe, about its economy and about its military - all Alex Salmond gives them is bluster and assertion. Once again he has been found wanting."

And Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont said: "If Alex Salmond thinks devolution is a stepping stone to leaving the UK, he's got another thing coming."

Responding to Labour's criticism of the childcare announcement, a spokesman for the First Minister said: "Building on the progress already made, we are now in a position as a majority government to put it in statute so that over 600 hours will be in place in 2014-15, and that is exactly what we will do."

-reprinted from the Herald Scotland

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