

SCOTLAND'S NEW GOVERNMENT PRIORITIES – PART ONE

First Minister Alex Salmond today started to set out the priorities for the SNP government's legislative programme. However, it quickly became apparent this programme will run in a series of instalments over the days and weeks ahead, as the First Minister restricted his statement today to the economy and energy with the promise of more to follow on education, health and justice amongst other matters.

Starting by saying that it "is time to get down to business" and that "Scotland's new politics starts now" the new First Minister painted an optimistic vision of Holyrood as a place where government will be held to account by the parliament, a vow that his government would not be a dogmatic or intransigent one, and a recognition that all parties will require to win support from others for the policies.

This is not least because the SNP administration is a minority one which needs to broker opposition support for any prospective Bill. Alex Salmond not only acknowledged this, but positioned it as positive for Scotland. He also said that legislation was not always the best way to effect change, and that parliament must not be interventionist. Again this is an acknowledgement that the SNP's lack of a majority will restrict its ability to pass legislation and so where possible reforms such as a restructure of Scottish Enterprise will be implemented without the need to bring them before parliament and risk a government defeat.

The First Minister went on to describe his statement as a first draft rather than a final statement, but it is fair to say it was a draft short on detail. He made commitments to maintain the priority for economic growth, to remove tolls for the Forth and Tay road bridges, to reduce business rates, to bring forward a climate change bill to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and re-iterated his support for renewable and green energy.

The proposed Council of Economic Advisers will be announced in the weeks ahead, and will have an international remit and membership, drawn from academia and business. The First Minister stated he will seek parliament's support for the Council's policy recommendations.

He also acknowledged aspects of his opponents own policies – the LibDem's commitment to young people and renewable energy, the Tories' proposals for more police officers and drug rehabilitation measures, and Labour's proposals on the purchase of tobacco and alcohol. These suggest areas where the SNP feels it could reach a deal, perhaps in return for support on other SNP priorities.

Alex Salmond finished on a statesman-like note, vowing that his government would be the most outward-looking one Scotland has ever had, and that this is not a time for Scotland to be timid, but to find its voice in international affairs. He maintained that his government could both deliver core domestic policies to improve the quality of life in Scotland, and at the same time examine Scotland's constitutional future.

However, the First Minister's statement made no mention of an independence referendum, the replacement of council tax with a local income tax, Edinburgh's Airport Rail Link, hospital closures, education and skills, or further education. It was left to opposition MSPs to raise these

issues, and for Alex Salmond to confirm his intention to hold an independence referendum, to replace council tax with a local income tax, and to review the Edinburgh Airport Rail Link.

Former First Minister Jack McConnell pressed his successor on the increased congestion predicted as a result of abolishing road bridge tolls, and his plans to reorganise Scottish Enterprise. Alex Salmond acknowledged the prospect of increased congestion but maintained the abolition of tolls would deliver a substantial economic boost to businesses and communities which use the bridge. Scottish Enterprise will be reformed, slimmed down and redirected and the First Minister again indicated that local councils could take on the responsibilities of local enterprise companies.

The First Minister spoke at length on energy and restated his opposition to new nuclear power stations. He heralded what he intends to call "Green Energy Day" – a point in the next few weeks when Scotland's installed capacity of nuclear power will be matched by the installed capacity of renewable regeneration – hydro, wind, biomass and landfill gas power. In two years time he predicted Scotland's renewable installed capacity will reach a minimum of 3086 megawatts compared to a nuclear capacity of 2465 MW.

This is a clear concession to the Scottish Greens and LibDems who both campaigned on renewable energy issues, but Alex Salmond is also committed to carbon-based energy with his support for clean coal technology which will cause tensions with these same two parties.

The overriding theme of Alex Salmond's statement was for all parts of the parliament to engage in a policy debate which will be reflected in the government's legislation, that his government is prepared to listen and learn, and that all parties have a responsibility to co-operate to improve the governance of Scotland. But as Jack McConnell put it, 'it's hard to scrutinise the Executive when there's so little to scrutinise'.