

LABOUR'S AMBITIONS
FOR THE HIGHLANDS AND ISLANDS



BUILDING
SCOTLAND



The Highlands and Islands of Scotland is without question emerging as one of the most dynamic, exciting, go ahead regions in our nation.

From the time in the 1960s when a previous Labour Government recognised that the condition of the Highlands and Islands required special support through the creation of the HIDB, the Highlands and Islands has been on the way back. Today, with its population growth, its economic prosperity and opportunity, its quality of education and environment, its low crime rates and excellent health services, the Highlands and Islands stands as an inspiration to all Scotland.

But far as it has come, I want to see the Highlands and Islands go further, to provide more opportunity for all its people.

I believe the Highlands and Islands has its greatest opportunity if we play to our strengths in Scotland; remaining part of a strong union with the rest of the UK and using the extensive powers of our devolved Parliament to drive further progress, to meet our higher ambition.

Scotland's future, our future, lies in the education of our people. Scotland has a strong education system and within Scotland the Highlands and Islands has many of Scotland's best schools and highest educational standards. I want to take that education system to the next level, from being among the best, to being the very best in the world. The Highlands and Islands can not only join all of Scotland in that journey, it can help lead that progress.

From the strongest educational base, we will be able to compete in the global markets that increasingly will dominate world trade; we will be able to develop the skills that will provide prosperity for future generations; we will be able to tackle the global environmental challenges we face; we will be able to build the public services we aspire to and need to support our people - a better health service with the high level skills it needs, a healthier population, a people imbued with respect for each-other and living in safe and prosperous communities.

Because of this, more young people will be able to choose to stay in the Highlands & Islands, to build a career and raise a family.

Labour's ambitions for the Highlands and Islands

I am proud of what we have achieved for Scotland in these few years since devolution, but I know there is much more to be done, there is much more I want to do for my country.

I believe Labour presents to the Scottish people a record of achievement and a platform for progress that will best meet Scotland's needs and aspirations.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'J McConnell', written in a cursive style.

Rt. Hon. Jack McConnell
First Minister

Introduction

This document highlights and builds upon many of Labour's pledges from its manifesto for Scotland – Building Scotland - which have particular relevance to the Highlands and Islands.

It should be read in conjunction with Labour's full manifesto. Readers might also be interested in local manifestos for the Highland and Argyll & Bute Councils – all available on www.highlandlabour.org.uk.

Our key objectives for the Highlands and Islands for the next Parliament are to:

- Build UHI to secure its full university status
- Build faster transport connections to and from the Highlands and Islands
- Build more economic prosperity and diversity in the economy
- Build the best health services, delivered as locally as possible
- Build ever safer communities, free from anti-social behaviour
- Build the region's reputation as one of supreme environmental and tourism quality

Building Prosperity

The Scottish economy is strong, and is getting stronger. Our partnership with the UK has delivered stability, while business dynamism and innovation has seen Scotland go from strength to strength. In 2003, Scottish Labour made growing the economy our top priority and we have made good progress.

Since 1999 life in the Highlands and Islands has improved, with broadband connectivity, jobs, improved communications and investment in public transport,

Scottish Labour will:

- Continue to invest in Highlands and Islands Enterprise.
- Aim for full and fulfilling employment with our Full Employment Agency working hand in hand with Highlands and Islands Enterprise.
- Invest in key and high growth industries of particular relevance to the Highlands and Islands:
 - Life sciences
 - Renewable energy
 - Tourism
 - Food and drink
- Increase the number of modern apprenticeships in the Highlands and Islands to at least 5,000 and ensure these opportunities are distributed across the region.
- Establish our first Skills Academies in key secondary schools and in our colleges to widen opportunity for vocational learning and raise its status.
- Further develop research capacity across the Highlands and Islands, through UHI and partner agencies.
- Increase access to continuing professional development for business within the region.
- Ask HIE to advise the rest of Scotland on the development of social enterprises.
- Encourage local bids from towns in need of regeneration in the region to our Town Centres Turnaround Fund.
- Give councils new compulsory purchase powers to more rapidly improve town centres and economically important but currently derelict buildings.

Labour's ambitions for the Highlands and Islands

- Ensure the former oil construction yard at Nigg, and the wider Cromarty Firth, are firmly part of Scotland's strategic development priorities.
- Encourage HIE to assist in turning available disused, or underused land, like the former Machrihanish air base, into modern productive use.
- Support further job relocations to and within the Highlands and Islands where appropriate.
- Continue the highly successful islands discount on air fares.
- Introduce a new discount scheme for island passengers on ferries.
- Support the further expansion of air routes to and from the Highlands and Islands to destinations across the UK and into continental Europe.
- Progressively improve the key road connections to the Highlands through developments of the A9 north and south of Inverness, the A96 to Aberdeen, the A82 to Fort William and Glasgow.
- Other strategic pinch-points in the Highlands and Islands, such as the Inverness Southern Distributor Route will receive priority attention, as will the increasing congestion problems at the south end of the Kessock Bridge.
- Retain our offer of subsidy to the Campbelltown to Ballycastle ferry and work with the Northern Ireland Assembly to secure its re-introduction.
- Pursue a satisfactory resolution of the Cowal ferry services, so that communities served continue to enjoy vehicle and passenger services on both of the existing routes, operating on as unrestricted basis as possible.
- Ensure that Calmac engage with their users and local communities in the operation and development of services.
- Promote further improvements in the integration of transport, in particular linking ferry services with connections to train and bus routes.
- Continue to support the development of a container hub in Scapa Flow.
- Strategic investments in cutting rail times to the east and south of Inverness, in particular, will be encouraged.
- Support the development of the Edinburgh Airport Rail Link as a key hub for the Highlands and Islands giving direct connections from the north to the International Airport and reducing journey times.

Labour's ambitions for the Highlands and Islands

- Continue to give vital subsidies to Highlands and Islands Airports Ltd and to Cal Mac to provide lifeline air and ferry services.
- The proportion of people working in tourism is higher in the Highlands & Islands than in the rest of Scotland. We will increase tourism revenues by 50 per cent by 2015.
- We will promote the region as a year-round destination, enhancing skills training in the industry, and thereby allow local people to have year-round rather than seasonal employment. We will encourage local tourism organisations to work together, and with EventScotland and visitScotland, to this end.

Building Futures

Education is the purest form of investment—an investment in our potential. Education opens up choices and opportunities for people; breaks the link between the life chances of the parents and those of the child; and lifts people out of poverty. Education drives productivity and economic prosperity and promotes social cohesion and cultural development. We know that education - at its best - is life changing and Scottish Labour is determined that the life chances it provides will be unlimited. That is why Labour has given education the highest priority.

Scottish Labour will:

- Complete the development of the University of the Highlands and Islands.
- Support the development of the new campus for Inverness College, as a key strategic part of the University development, and progressively bring other college buildings in the Highlands and Islands up to the standards of the best.
- Widen opportunity for 16 and 17 year olds across the region, so that no young person leaves school without a clear destination in work, training, higher or further education, or volunteering.
- Continue to invest in schools in need of refurbishment or replacement, through our largest ever school building programme.
- Expand the number of places available in Scotland's colleges and universities, specifically increasing the number of science graduates.
- Expand the number of hours per week and weeks per year of free pre-school provision to 15 hours and 38 weeks and open up new provision for vulnerable 2 year olds.
- Continue to support an expansion in Gaelic medium education, wherever feasible through schools, as well as Gaelic medium units.
- Utilise the expertise of Gaelic medium education to build new opportunities to learn other modern European and world languages.
- Progressively, year on year, reduce class sizes and improve pupil teacher ratios.
- Support new guidance on school rationalisation, embedding the principle that there should be no presumption in favour of a school closure prior to consultation and encourage councils to have their consultation proposals independently scrutinised.

Building safer communities

In 2003 Labour promised to take comprehensive action against anti-social behaviour. We delivered with more police, more community wardens, the biggest top to bottom reform of our court system in generations and better support for victims and witnesses.

But new challenges now lie ahead. Labour wants to go even further to empower communities, delivering justice at community level – with rapid and visible consequences for those that disrespect and undermine.

We are determined to build a just and secure community for all.

Scottish Labour will:

- Double the number of community wardens in the Highlands and Islands.
- Require community police teams in every area of Scotland, with each team having a named officer to report to the local community.
- Expand our junior community warden scheme.
- Expand environmental wardens dealing with graffiti and dog fouling.
- Involve local communities so they can see visible payback to the areas offenders have damaged.
- Reinvest more money seized from drug dealers back into those communities hardest hit by drugs, while continuing to provide a wide range of treatments tailored to the needs of the individual.
- Give more victims the chance to make victim impact statement in court.

Building a sustainable Highlands and Islands

Labour has placed sustainable development at the heart of government, recognising that climate change is the most serious long-term challenge our planet faces. The Highlands & Islands are crucial to the renewable energy that will help Scotland play its part in mitigating climate change. The Highlands & Islands also hold in trust many of our best landscapes and biodiversity, which in turn are central to the tourism industry. Labour will safeguard that natural environment.

Scottish Labour will:

- Encourage more local production of food and an increasing supply of organic produce for local consumption and in, for example, school meals.
- Support crofting as one foundation for best environmental practice and sustainable agricultural production and community development.
- Promote further land purchase by communities and keep under review our land reform programme as a whole, and if there is evidence that landowners are acting to frustrate the intentions of Parliament we will close any loopholes.
- Secure sustainable fisheries, based on sound science, local economic opportunities and the most local fisheries management systems we can create.
- Encourage local authorities to develop decentralised community energy companies and combined heat and power schemes.
- Widen opportunity for renewables manufacturing, utilising the skills base in the Highlands and Islands and supported by an increasing commitment to renewable energy sources.
- Support local authorities, through the planning system, to ensure renewables applications are fully scrutinised and sensitively sited.
- Support measures for better insulated homes and for increased use of micro-renewable technologies in domestic homes.

Building a healthier Highlands and Islands

Ten years ago, Labour promised to renew our NHS - to build more hospitals, recruit more doctors and nurses and invest in local clinics and health centres. And that is what we have done. In a third term, our aim is to produce an NHS that is fit for the 21st Century and beyond. Labour wants a health service that is designed to meet the needs of patients – that is flexible and able to deliver high quality services at a local level. And we are determined that the NHS will tackle the difficult issues head on – focusing on health prevention just as much as cure.

Scottish Labour will:

- Further reduce waiting times to a maximum of 18 weeks from referral from a GP to completion of treatment, and cut waiting for allied health professionals to a maximum of 9 weeks.
- Develop services as locally as possible, and as specialist as necessary.
- Stop the selling of cigarettes to anyone under 18 and remove licences from shops selling alcohol to anyone under 18.
- Encourage more local food co-operatives.
- Devolve more local health care in, for example, renal dialysis to local community hospitals wherever possible.
- Expand telemedicine.
- Develop more local community hospitals for the delivery of local healthcare.
- Encourage Councils to exercise discretion and to maintain wherever they find it appropriate a strategic involvement in the direct management and delivery of elderly care.
- Continue to provide incentives to dentists not to turn their backs on national health patients by:
 - Providing cash incentives above normal earnings to stick with the NHS
 - Providing enhanced golden hellos to dentists to practice in the Highlands and Islands
 - Paying the rent of rural dental practices
 - Provide salaried dentists in key rural locations to provide direct services to patients where private dentists will not do so.

Building strong families and communities

Labour has supported Scottish families through tax reforms, investment in public services and new rights in the workplace.

Our financial management has delivered stable mortgage rates for Scottish families, no more boom and bust of the Tory years when interest rates sat at 15 per cent for a whole year and 1.5 million homes across the UK suffered negative equity.

We have invested in rural housing and are helping more families take their first step onto the housing ladder. We now want to step up our efforts to spread prosperity to all our communities and improve housing, regenerate deprived communities and lift people out of poverty.

Scottish Labour will:

- Increase entitlement to free school meals to those in the Highlands and Islands in receipt of maximum working tax credit.
- Create new opportunities for older people to volunteer to support community life.
- Double the successful 'homestake' scheme which allows people on modest incomes to get onto the property ladder.
- Through the National Planning Framework, allow for a significant increase in the number of new private sector homes built in Scotland each year. Maintain pressured area status to allow councils to refrain from selling council houses where that need exists.
- Require councils, through the new planning laws, to ensure a ready supply of land available for affordable housing.
- Support the voluntary sector to become more fully part of the community planning process and to be recognised as a key provider of modern services for vulnerable groups.

Building creativity

The cultural renaissance brought about by devolution has been as strong in the Highlands & Islands as anywhere in Scotland. As Scotland's Year of Highland Culture is celebrated, Labour will enhance the support given to culture in the region, give all Highlanders and islanders rights to cultural participation, and recognise the place of Gaelic.

Scottish Labour will:

- Invest in local facilities as part of the drive to help renew Scotland's football infrastructure.
- Support Nairn Academy as Scotland's first 'golf centre of excellence'.
- Support throughout 2007 Scotland's Year of Highland Culture and its legacy funding to strengthen the region's artistic infrastructure.
- Ensure the 2009 'year of homecoming' builds on the success of Highland 2007 and that the Highlands and Islands is a key part of the homecoming promotion.
- Look to exploit opportunities to locate film and other creative industries in key locations in the region.
- Vigorously pursue the requirements under the Gaelic Language Act to promote the development of Gaelic.
- Actively support the development of the Gaelic digital channel.
- Continue to support Sabhal Mòr Ostaig as a vital centre for Gaelic development in Scotland.

Building better government

The patterns of population and settlement in the Highlands & Islands present unique challenges, but Labour believes they can be made into opportunities to improve services and pilot new models of public service reform, empowering local communities and joining up public bodies.

Scottish Labour will:

- Support public sector reform and the increasing development of shared backroom systems between public agencies.
- Encourage more decentralised delivery of services.
- Encourage and incentivise joining up between local authorities and other public agencies to provide specialist services and to optimally manage service delivery irrespective of administrative boundaries.
- Encourage the development of a single door to public services within the Islands Council areas, with the potential for those Island Councils wishing to, to pilot the development of a single public sector for their islands.

