

Dr Sarah Main  
Campaign for Science and Engineering  
Gordon House  
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18 April 2016

Dear Dr Main,

Thank you very much for writing to me in advance of the Scottish Parliament election in May.

I wholeheartedly agree that science and engineering are crucial to Scotland's future. With estimates suggesting that there will be over 7 million jobs in these professions across the UK by 2030 it is incumbent on the next Scottish Government to take concerted action that welcomes businesses to set up here and ensure we have well qualified people to fill these jobs.

The Scottish Conservatives have continually supported campaigns to improve STEM teaching in schools, including the Royal Society of Chemistry's which asks for a science specialist in every primary school. This recognises that having a teacher who coordinates STEM learning can increase participation as young people progress in school and foster positive attitudes for these subjects. It would also be beneficial for pupils if their teachers had better access to CPD. Innovations in STEM mean the subject is constantly changing so we need to empower teachers with knowledge of what is happening within their subjects more widely so they can inspire pupils and show them the power of what STEM can do.

We must also get more highly qualified graduates into teaching. The number of teachers has fallen by over 4,300 under the SNP and subjects including maths, technology, and computing science have been disproportionately affected. These subjects, as well as physics, have also struggled to recruit enough graduates to reach targets for teacher training. My party has made a manifesto commitment to introduce bursaries for students on STEM PGDE courses to attract graduates into teaching and to help widen access.

We are concerned that last year there was a slight decline in the number of Higher presentations in STEM subjects. This follows a number of years where the numbers had been increasing so this situation should be monitored. So too should presentations for Nationals as some teachers have cited concerns that the introduction of Curriculum for Excellence has resulted in fewer subjects being studied – this should not squeeze out STEM or reduce choice for pupils.

Further education is also of critical importance in Scotland and the SNP's decision to cut 152,000 college places is misguided. Scottish Conservatives have made it clear we want to restore further education budgets to the level before it suffered huge cuts. We would also increase the number of apprenticeship starts by 10,000 per year and aim to open ten skills academies across Scotland which would focus on teaching the kind of skills that are aligned with business need.

If we value science and engineering then that also means listening to the sector when making decisions on relevant public policy. The last Scottish Government continually showed contempt for the science and engineering community when their opinions were dismissed and pressure groups were listened to instead. Some of the most high profile examples of this were decisions on GM crops and unconventional gas extraction, both of which we have criticised as contrary to scientific evidence.

The devolution of significant tax powers through the Scotland Act 2016 means this election has for the first time seen parties set out their policies on income tax in a devolved Parliament. I am the only leader who is arguing against Scotland becoming the highest taxed part of the United Kingdom, with every one of my opponents suggesting income tax increases above the levels South of the Border. Hanging a "Higher Taxes Here" sign at the Border will do nothing to attract the businesses and professionals that we need to grow our economy in Scotland.

We would be delighted to continue to work with CaSE across all policy areas to ensure that science and engineering remain at the top of the agenda for the next Parliamentary session.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read 'Ruth Davidson', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Ruth Davidson