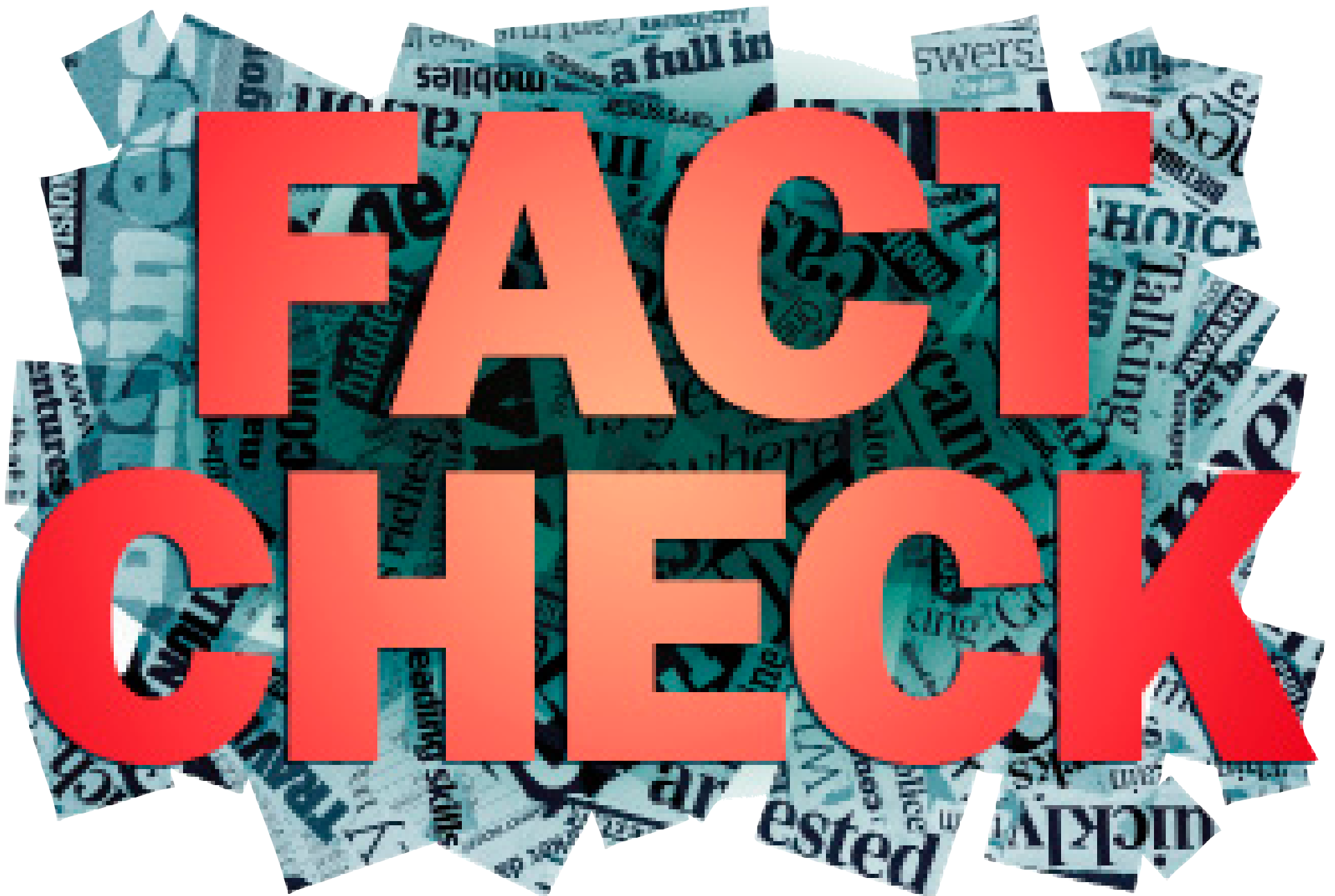


THE NATIONAL

THE NEWSPAPER THAT SUPPORTS AN INDEPENDENT SCOTLAND



Our new Unionist rebuttal service kicks off today!

No Murdo Fraser statement will be safe from our top team of checkers **by Callum Baird**

WE all know that the Unionist press and political ranks are full of people who are happy to say anything and everything about independence which could undermine the case for Scotland voting Yes.

Part of the role of The National is to be the counterpoint to the Unionist press – and over the years we’ve dabbled in myth-busting and fact-checking, but never to

the extent that we’ve committed to today. We pledge to examine claims about Scotland in great depth and work out exactly why they are false (or otherwise).

We’ll supply a “doorstep answer” – which will be relatively short and will provide you with a couple of sentences you need to say in a conversation to rebut these claims.

From the Spanish veto to the deficit and the SNP’s mandate, the level of disinformation around Scottish politics can be remarkable. But no more!

More often than not, this service will be reactive. If Boris Johnson says something at Prime Minister’s Questions, then we want to get our response out there within a couple of hours.

But for our launch day today, we’ve put six dodgy – and one not-so-dodgy – claims made by politicians, newspapers and others to the test. We’re aiming to publish at least two or three a week – but of course that depends on how outlandish the Unionist arguments become!

We won’t give away the identity of our secret team of fact-checkers – but we can confirm that they have the clout, track record and in-depth knowledge that is required to deliver on this task.

Finally ... we’ve only been able to launch this service today because you have signed up to support us and our 10,000 Steps campaign. We can do so much more as well – if you haven’t backed us yet then please do at www.thenational.scot/subscribe.

A big drop in well-being?

Unionist issues biased report...

CLAIM

"Alarm as Scotland slides down the global wellbeing rankings ... Scotland posted one of the biggest falls among developed countries in the latest index of social and economic well-being" – *The Scotsman*, January 22, 2020

DOORSTEP ANSWER

THIS so-called "index of well-being" is not an official publication but is the work of a self-employed and self-styled "political economist" called John McLaren. McLaren previously was a special adviser to both Donald Dewar and Henry McLeish and is a staunch Unionist. McLaren's index is poorly constructed, uses too narrow a range of only four benchmarks and draws unwarranted conclusions from tiny movements in the data. In fact, the SNP Government has been pursuing a national well-being strategy which benchmarks 81 national indicators.

BACKGROUND

THE index of well-being is produced and self-published by Scottish economist John McLaren. McLaren was a civil servant at both HM Treasury (1985-1988) and at the Scottish Office (1989-1998). He then worked full-time for the Labour Party in the campaign leading up to the first election of the new Scottish Parliament in 1999. Subsequently, McLaren was appointed as special adviser to first minister Donald Dewar, and then worked for Henry McLeish.

In 2006, McLaren was hired by the Labour Party on a consultancy basis to undertake campaign work leading up to the 2007 Holyrood election. In no sense can he be considered an impartial observer, though he now claims to have no political affiliations. He works as a self-employed economic consultant. It is reasonable to conclude his well-being index is a publicity tool for his consultancy business.

McLAREN MEASURES TOO FEW BENCHMARKS

THE McLaren well-being index is composed of only four measured components: GDP per capita, school attainment at 15 only, life expectancy and employment rate. Most officially recognised indices combine far more elements to create a rounded picture. For instance, the well-regarded OECD Better Life Index combines 11 key components: housing, income, jobs, community, education, environment, civic engagement, health, life satisfaction, safety and work-life balance. In addition, in for each individual component, the OECD Index measures a variety of sub-components. This means the OECD

measures changes in nearly 30 individual factors. This methodology is far superior to McLaren's crude four-factor index.

Another respected official study is the regular European Quality of Life Survey, which is published every four years by the European Union. This study tracks 262 factors, not four. In addition, the EU study interviews 37,000 people in 33 European countries in order to add a subjective dimension to its findings. Against this, ranking only four elements is bound to produce minimum results as well as prove artificially volatile.

If one out of the four measured elements changes, that appears artificially as a major shift. But if you are measuring 262 elements, a shift in one or a few has less impact on the overall rating.

McLaren justifies his basic four benchmarks by saying they are "the most essential". But surely housing is essential? Surely the environment is essential? McLaren's choice of benchmarks is crude, unsubstantiated and unscientific.

McLAREN DOES NOT MEASURE ABSOLUTE WELL-BEING

HOW does McLaren calculate his index?

First, he measures national scores as changes against the worst and best performers. For example, if life expectancy varies between 76 and 80 for all countries, he takes 76 as a datum and measures who scored above that.

This means his index is not measuring absolute well-being – which most people would consider the important thing. He is measuring against other countries. So Scotland could have an excellent absolute score but if another country rises faster, then Scotland appears to fall in well-being.

As McLaren himself admits: "While all countries may be doing well and improving over time, some countries have managed to find ways of eking out extra income or extra years of life" – but that is not how it is misrepresented in the Unionist media.

McLAREN CHANGES THE DEFINITION OF OECD

THE newspaper reports of McLaren's index claimed this was a comparison of OECD industrial countries. But a close reading of McLaren's findings show that he has deliberately removed a number of OECD member states from his study. They are Chile, Israel,



Ireland, Latvia, Luxembourg, Mexico and Turkey. His rationale is that "their inclusion overly distorts the results". For instance, he drops

Ireland (surely a relevant comparator with Scotland?) because "the behaviour of multinational companies seriously distorts its GDP per capita". As a result of this manipulation, McLaren can claim that Scotland has dropped into the "bottom half of OECD nations". But he has deliberately excluded the lowest-scoring OECD nations to achieve this result.

McLAREN USES A DUBIOUS TIME PERIOD

YOU can read press reports of the McLaren index findings without discovering the time period that the changes cover. All you discover is that Scotland "fell five places". In fact, McLaren is covering changes between 2006 and 2018. This period is entirely random. It does not start at the top of the last economic cycle, which would be normal methodology. Economies (including Scotland's) have expanded then contracted in this period.

WHAT WEIGHT TO PUT ON GDP

McLAREN gives equal weight to each of the four benchmarks. But how valid is that – especially when it comes to including GDP? Is GDP per capita any longer a valid measure of well-being for ordinary individuals? GDP measures a country's total output, but it does not indicate who gets what. GDP per capita has grown in Scotland and the UK, but since the 2008 recession average wages in real terms have stagnated.

SCOTLAND SCORES HIGH IN OTHER WELL-BEING STUDIES
A CLOSE look at McLaren's

ostensible findings suggests his "index" is less than useful.

His outcome table shows that Scotland's score fell by a microscopic 0.05 (out of a possible 4) in the period 2006 to 2018. This is not statistically significant, and McLaren is a good enough economist to know this. We should also note that only three of the 32 countries on his index show ostensible falls in well-being during this long period – the others are Finland and Greece.

It defies common sense to think rich, communitarian Finland has seen reduced well-being between 2006 and 2018, or that events in Scotland mirror the catastrophic economic and social collapse in Greece.

In contrast to the McLaren "index", Scotland rates high in other, more scientific studies. For instance, the October 2016 EU Regional Social Progress study found that Scotland had the best quality of life among the four home nations. Unlike McLaren's work, this study used 50 benchmarks, including health, safety, access to education and personal rights. Scotland scored 74 out of 100. The highest performing region for quality of life was Upper Norrland in Sweden, which scored 82 out of 100 while the lowest-scoring region, south-east Bulgaria, scored 39.72.

The Scottish Government already has a National Performance Framework through which seeks to improve well-being and sustainable and inclusive economic growth. This framework tracks 81 key indicators. There is a regular progress report on the Scottish Government's website.

FACT-CHECK RATING: FALSE

Data chosen to fit McLaren's preferred outcome...

✘ false

We look at Boris's reason to reject a S30 order

CLAIM

"Another independence referendum will continue the political stagnation that Scotland has seen for the past decade, with Scottish schools, hospitals and jobs again left behind because of a campaign to separate the UK" – Boris Johnson's letter rejecting indyref2

DOORSTEP ANSWER ON JOBS

SCOTLAND'S unemployment rate is below that of the UK and below that of five of the nine English regions, including London where Boris was mayor. Scotland's youth unemployment is well below that of both the UK and the rest of Europe. Scotland's business creation is at a record level.

HOW IS THIS MEASURED?

ONE obvious test is the rate of unemployment – normally measured for those over age 16. According to the Office for National Statistics, in Scotland the unemployment rate stood at 3.7% (for Q3 of 2019) compared to 3.8% for the UK, 3.8% for England and an average of 6.3% for the EU. Scottish unemployment was 0.3 percentage points down for the quarter and 0.1 percentage points down for the year. Clearly there is no evidence here that the Scottish Government has a poor track record on jobs.

If we look at the situation in the individual UK regions, we find that unemployment is in many cases far worse than in Scotland. Of the nine English regions, five have a higher unemployment rate than Scotland: North East (6.1), North West (4.0), Yorkshire and Humber (4.1), West Midlands (4.5) and, surprisingly, London (4.5). The East Midlands is on a par with Scotland and only three English regions have a lower unemployment rate than Scotland: East (3.2), South East (3.1) and South West (2.6).

Note, the ONS unemployment figures are compiled using a sampling basis which is known to be very error prone. However, over the period since 2011, Scottish unemployment on the ONS data has usually been lower than the UK figure, proving there is no evidence for Boris Johnson's claim that the SNP Government has a bad track record on the jobs front. The real jobs crisis lies in the North of England and inner London.

YOUTH EMPLOYMENT

ANOTHER way of examining the success or failure of the labour market is to look at youth employment. The latest numbers for youth employment were published in December by the Scottish Government. They refer to the



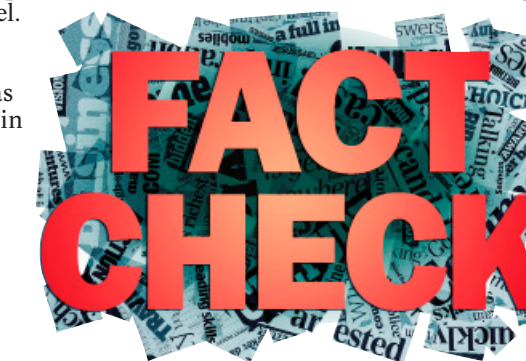
'Indyref2 is causing Scotland to stagnate'

16-24 age group. In Scotland, the youth employment rate is 59% compared with only 54.2% at the UK level. This gives the lie to the PM's allegation against the Scottish Government that it has a poor jobs record.

The youth unemployment rate in Scotland is 9.1% compared to 11.4% at a UK level. The average youth unemployment rate in the EU in 2019 was 15% and above 30% in some countries. By this score, Scotland has one of the best youth employment records. (Note: the remainder of young people are for the most part in education, home carers or not seeking work.)

Some point to the fact that Scotland has a higher inactivity rate for the past four years – people not in the jobs market – as proof that the Scottish labour market underperforms compared to England. But the "inactive" are largely those in education or

performing home care duties. Scotland has traditionally had a much higher participation rate in higher and further education than in England. In 2013-14, for instance, according to a study by the Sutton Trust, 55% of Scots entered higher education by the age of 30, compared to only 46.6% in England.



ENTREPRENEURSHIP

THE SNP Government has a strong track record in helping the creation of new businesses as job providers. As of March 2019, there were an estimated 356,550 private sector businesses operating in Scotland – the highest number since current records began in 2000, despite the intervening

financial crisis of 2008. Between 2000 and 2019, the estimated total number of businesses increased by an amazing 50% – hardly a sign of failure at the day job. Despite Brexit uncertainties, Scotland continues to grow businesses successful thanks to support from the Scottish Government and Scottish

Enterprise. The number of new businesses registered for VAT and/or PAYE also increased in the 12 months to March 2019 – up by 2485 (1.4%) to 178,780 – also the highest on record.

Over the latest year, the number of registered businesses in the strategic "financial and insurance activities" sector increased by 6.3% (+140 businesses) – the sector with the highest relative growth. The number of registered businesses in the construction sector jumped by 475 (+2.3%) – a key indication of confidence in the local economy. Business growth was widespread, with the stock of registered businesses increasing in 23 of Scotland's 32 local authority areas. Registered business stock rose highest in Edinburgh (+3.3%, 650 businesses) and Glasgow (+2.7%, 530 businesses).

FACT-CHECK RATING: FALSE

Boris lies again...

✘ false

Does the SNP have a cast-iron mandate to hold indyref2?

Nicola Sturgeon says she does – but let's see if she is right

MANIFESTO CLAIM

"We have a cast-iron mandate for indyref2" – The SNP

DOORSTEP ANSWER

THE SNP have won four elections since 2016 with an explicit manifesto commitment to hold a second independence referendum. Twice (in 2017 and 2019) a majority of all MSPs at Holyrood have voted to back a second independence referendum.

BACKGROUND

THE sheer consistency of popular support for a second independence referendum – as expressed by the SNP's successful polling record – means that there is popular backing for letting Scotland decide for itself. At Westminster level, where first past the post is the accepted basis for legitimacy, the SNP has won successive majorities of MPs (2015, 2017, 2019) on the basis of popular support for letting Scotland decide for itself.

The first issue to consider is whether the concept of an election manifesto commitment has any constitutional or legal force in the UK? Unfortunately, in the UK there is no written constitution, so the duty to implement a manifesto pledge voted on by the people is only a parliamentary convention – though one that has rarely been challenged, except when it comes to the call for a second independence referendum.

The British convention is that if proposals are "put before the country" and the people vote "with full knowledge of these proposals" then there is a mandate which should be accepted – to quote Viscount Cranborne, Tory leader in the Lords in 1945, agreeing to allow Labour legislation to pass despite a huge Conservative majority in the Upper House.

However, only on very rare occasions, at Westminster or Holyrood, do parties secure an absolute majority (the SNP won a popular majority at the 2015 General Election). Therefore, under the

British first-past-the-post system, the party commanding a plurality of support is allowed to implement its manifesto. It can be (and is) argued by the Conservative and Labour parties that such a Westminster plurality necessarily trumps a popular Scottish majority. Yet this argument is a political one, not a constitutional rule. Taken to an extreme, the view that Westminster has a permanent right to overrule Scottish opinion expressed consistently at the ballot box is a travesty of democracy.

THE MANIFESTO

TIMELINE:

7 MAY 2015

GENERAL ELECTION

THE SNP manifesto prioritises holding the Westminster parties to account over the so-called Vow that promised "modern

Home Rule" for Scotland just prior to the 2014 independence referendum.

The manifesto also stipulates that in any EU referendum, there must be a double majority requirement, whereby each of the four constituent UK nations has to vote for withdrawal before the UK as a whole can leave. The SNP wins 56 of the 59 Scottish parliamentary seats exactly just over 50% of the popular vote – 51.3% including the pro-independence Greens. The Vow is not delivered and the Cameron government refuses the "double majority" rule for the EU referendum. The Tory share of the poll is only 36.9% yet it claims a mandate to govern.

5 MAY 2016 HOLYROOD ELECTION

THE SNP manifesto for the Scottish Parliament says: "We believe that the Scottish Parliament should have the right to hold another referendum if there is clear and sustained evidence that independence has become the preferred option of a majority of the Scottish people – or if there is a significant and material change in the circumstances that prevailed in 2014, such as Scotland being

taken out of the EU against our will."

The SNP win 46.5% of the constituency vote and 63 seats.

Pro-independence parties win 69 of the 129 Holyrood seats – a mathematical majority.

23 JUNE 2016 EU REFERENDUM

THE referendum on European membership. Scotland votes 62% for Remain but the UK as a whole votes by 51.89% to Leave. All 32 counting districts in Scotland vote Remain. This triggers the SNP Holyrood manifesto commitment regarding a "significant and material change in the circumstances that prevailed in 2014, such as Scotland being taken out of the EU against our will".

28 MARCH 2017 HOLYROOD REFERENDUM BILL

FIRST Minister Nicola Sturgeon gains the approval of the Scottish Parliament to request a Section 30 order to enable a second independence referendum "when the shape of the UK's Brexit deal will become clear". The SNP motion wins by a substantial 69-59 margin after the Scottish Greens agree to support.

JUNE 8 2017 UK GENERAL ELECTION

THE SNP manifesto prioritises keeping Scotland in the EU single market and avoiding a hard Brexit. However, it also lays out this key pledge: "Last year's Holyrood election delivered the democratic mandate for an independence referendum. The recent vote of Scotland's national Parliament has underlined that mandate. If the SNP wins a majority of Scottish seats in this election, that would complete a triple lock, further reinforcing the democratic mandate which already exists. And, in such circumstances, any continued Tory attempts to block the people of Scotland having a choice on their future – when the time is right and the options are clear – would be democratically unsustainable."

The SNP comes first in Scotland but with a reduced poll share (36.9%). They win a majority – 35



out of 59 – of Scottish seats, the second-highest number in the SNP's history.

MAY 23 2019 EUROPEAN ELECTION

THE SNP manifesto concentrates mostly on making the case for continued Scottish membership of the EU but it does make a clear commitment to independence: "We want people to have the choice of a future for Scotland as an independent, European nation."

The SNP come first overall with 37.8% of the vote in Scotland. The pro-independence Greens win 8.2%.

DECEMBER 12 2019 UK GENERAL ELECTION

THE SNP's manifesto says: "The SNP is willing to take part in a progressive alliance to lock the Tories out of office. In any discussion, we will demand that the democratic right of people in Scotland to decide their own future is respected". The first key pledge in the manifesto was crystal clear in intent and operation:

"We believe that the best future for Scotland is to be an independent, European nation... We have a clear mandate to deliver a new referendum on becoming an independent country, and we are making it clear at this election that next year we intend to offer the people of Scotland a choice over their future.

"It is important to ensure a referendum is put beyond legal challenge. Before the end of the year, we will demand that the UK Government transfers the necessary powers under the Scotland Act to ensure the decisions about the referendum can be taken by the Scottish Parliament."

The SNP vote share increases to 45% and the party gains 13 seats, for a total of 48 out of 59. In second place, the Scottish Conservatives – who campaigned principally in opposition to a second independence referendum – lost seven seats and saw their vote share drop to 25.1%.

The Conservatives win at a UK level with 45.6% of the vote – a smaller share than the SNP wins in Scotland.

19 DECEMBER 2019 HOLYROOD REFERENDUM BILL

THE Scottish Parliament passes the Referendums (Scotland) Bill. The bill includes provision for the date, question and referendum period to be set by secondary legislation. The bill passes by 68 votes to 54.

FACT-CHECK RATING: TRUE

There is a strong moral and political mandate for indyref2 delivered at least four times from the Scottish people.



Scotland's 7% deficit – is it the worst in Europe?

This time the claim comes from Ruth Davidson

THE CLAIM

OFFICIAL figures show Scotland is running a 7% deficit - the highest in Europe – Ruth Davidson tweet, August 21, 2019

THE DOORSTEP ANSWER

The Scottish Government at Holyrood runs an annual surplus not a deficit and has done so every year since 2007. The provisional surplus for 2018-19 is £449 million.

COMPARED TO THE UK?

ON the other hand, the UK Governments (Labour, Conservative and coalition) have run annual deficits every year since 2001 – and most years since 1945. Scotland only has a notional deficit if elements of this endemic UK deficit are apportioned hypothetically to the normal Scottish Government surplus, as happens in the annual Government Expenditure and Revenue Scotland (GERS) paper exercise.

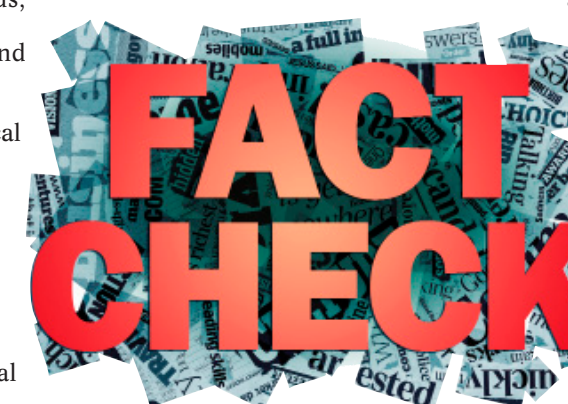
When the same hypothetical exercise is conducted across all UK nations and regions, nine areas show a notional deficit and three (the zone constituting London, the South East and East of England) show a notional surplus. This result reflects the bias that most commercial UK tax revenues are booked in London and environs because that is where most company headquarters are based.

BACKGROUND

THE following table shows the notional net fiscal balance (spending versus local tax revenues) of the standard UK regions and nations, calculated by the Office for National Statistics.

It shows that the English North West (Liverpool, etc) has the biggest notional deficit, while the so-called Scottish deficit is broadly similar to that of the West Midlands and Wales. The notional deficit in the West Midlands (Birmingham, etc) was actually greater than Scotland's in 2019: £15,015 billion versus £13,499bn on the ONS calculation.

In other words, there is nothing unique about the Scottish notional



UK or abroad they were earned. In an independent Scotland, on the other hand, these revenues would be taxed locally and register as Scottish Treasury income.

In addition, the East of England registers tax revenues from offshore gas fields in the English North Sea. Finally, the monopoly effect of London within the UK means that prices of property and living expenses are higher in the capital, which in turn generates above-average revenues for the Treasury. The imbalance between the notional deficits across the UK regions and nations compared with the notional surpluses in greater London is largely a statistical optical illusion.

Ruth Davidson's claim there is a 7% deficit in Scottish public finances relies on misrepresenting the 2018-19 GERS paper exercise. Using her misleading methodology, it is the English North-West and West Midlands that have the highest deficits in Europe! Actually, those English regions are just as short-changed by the GERS and ONS figures as is Scotland.

FACT-CHECK RATING: FALSE

Sorry Ruth, better luck next time.



Whisky is expensive in Scotland – all thanks to the SNP!

@GlaswegianTory in dodgy tweet

CLAIM

"Thanks to @theSNP, Scotland is one of the most expensive places in the world to buy Scotch whisky" – tweet from @GlaswegianTory August 31, 2019

DOORSTEP ANSWER

WESTMINSTER – not the Scottish Government – is responsible for the biggest element in the cost of a bottle of Scotch whisky – alcohol duty and VAT worth 72% of the retail price. In fact, many countries in Europe charge even higher taxes on spirits. The Trump administration plans a new 25% tariff on Scotch whisky.

BACKGROUND

AS OF 2018, there were 133 whisky distilleries in Scotland. Scotch whisky is the world's number one internationally traded spirit, with exports worth over £4 billion annually selling to 175 markets. Products vary in content (malts, grains, blend) and age. So crude blanket statements such as the claim quoted above are meaningless generalisations at best. However, it is possible to make some international price comparisons which easily invalidate the claim.

TAXES ON WHISKY

TAX ON SCOTCH IN THE UK currently stands at 72%. This means that around £3 in every £4 spent on Scotch whisky in the UK goes to HM Treasury in excise and VAT. Per unit of alcohol, Scotch whisky is taxed more than any other category of alcohol in Britain. For example, tax on Scotch Whisky is 16% more than tax on wine. Clearly

this level of tax is set by UK Conservative, Labour and coalition governments and can't be pinned on the SNP. In fact, only independence would give the power locally to reduce such duty, assuming Scots voted for this.

In March 2017, the then Conservative chancellor of the exchequer, Phillip Hammond, imposed a near 4% increase in duty on spirits, as a revenue-raising measure. As a result, sales fell by one million bottles in the first six months of 2018. This duty increase was in fact opposed by the SNP Government and SNP MPs.

IMPACT OF MINIMUM ALCOHOL PRICING

SINCE 2018, the Scottish Government has imposed a unit alcohol tax, making it illegal for shops in Scotland to sell alcohol for less than 50p per unit. This was done for health reasons given Scotland's chronic problems with alcoholism. The effect on domestic whisky prices was limited as the biggest relative impact fell on the very cheapest blended products – after all, that was the intent of the legislation. Asda increased the price of Famous Grouse from £12 for a 70cl bottle to £14. Tesco increased the price of its Scots Club Blend from £11 for 70cl, to £14. For mainstream malt products, which were already expensive as a result of HM Treasury duty and VAT, the proportion-ate impact of



FACT CHECK



Around £3 in every £4 spent on Scotch whisky in the UK goes to the Treasury

the new tax was negligible and had no effect on sales.

For the record, even the cost increase for the cheapest supermarket grains and blended products still left Scottish retail prices below the highest in continental Europe – invalidating the claim.

Three continental European economies price alcohol in general and spirits in particular at higher rates than in the UK – this makes imported Scotch whisky dearer than in Scotland (even with the unit alcohol tax, which merely sets a price floor).

WHISKY PRICES OUTSIDE OF EUROPE

AMERICA is the biggest importer of Scotch whisky. It is true that till recently whisky taxes have been relatively low in America. For instance, Johnnie Walker Red Label blend retails in the US for \$22.99 – \$24.99 for a 750ml bottle.

The Tesco price is circa £20 per 70cl bottle, meaning that in fact price levels are roughly equivalent. However, last year the Trump administration announced it was going to slap an import tariff of 25% on imports of Scotch whisky, in retaliation for alleged subsidies Europe gives to Airbus.

Scotch whisky has been imported tariff-free to the United States for the last 25 years. If the tariff goes ahead, the retail price of main Scotch brands in America will likely shoot higher than in Scotland.

The Scottish Whisky Association estimates that the new tariff will see exports to the US drop by as much as a fifth.

12-year-old Glenfiddich is circa £27 – which makes the Indian retail price around 30% dearer.

A bottle of Laphroaig starts at the equivalent of 3500 rupees or £38. The local Asda price in Scotland is around £30.

WHISKY PRICES IN THE USA AMERICA is the biggest importer of Scotch whisky. It is true that till recently whisky taxes have been relatively low in America. For instance, Johnnie Walker Red Label blend retails in the US for \$22.99 – \$24.99 for a 750ml bottle.

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FACT-CHECK RATING: FALSE

Bordering on fake news... **✗ false**

She won't be Labour leader – but was she right here?

CLAIM

"The SNP's abject failings on education are a threat to opportunity and equality for working people in Scotland" – Jess Phillips Labour MP, tweet on January 13, 2020

DOORSTEP ANSWER

THE latest international PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) scores for educational attainment by 15-year-olds show Scotland is well above the global average in reading and Scots teenagers outperform Americans, Russians and Israelis at maths. Under the SNP, the percentage of pupils gaining Higher or Advanced Higher has risen from 50% to 62%.

BACKGROUND

EVERY three years, PISA, run by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), tests 600,000 15-year-old school students in more than 70 countries in basic reading, maths and science.

It is taken as the gold standard in comparing educational attainment standards. The latest results (for 2018) were published in December 2019. All four UK nations were tested and reported separately.

Despite lurid headlines ("Sturgeon left humiliated by Scotland's education results" – Daily Express, December 4, 2019) the actual PISA results for Scotland put the country either above or in line with OECD rich nation standards, and even indicated improvements in reading scores.

In reading, Scottish pupils scored 504 points – a rise from the 493 attained in the last test in 2015. This puts Scotland in the same league as Japan (504), England (505), Norway (499) and Germany (498). It is also well above the OECD rich country average of 487 and significantly better than France (493), Netherlands (485), Switzerland (484) and Italy (476). In no reasonable sense can this be called "a failure" of Scottish education.

It is true that a narrow band of countries score significantly higher on reading ability, for instance China (555) and Finland (520). There are reasons to doubt the Chinese results on grounds of schools being selected for testing in richer urban areas. The Finnish results are more interesting given that Finland has pioneered the more creative, holistic approach to early education, similar to the Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) in Scotland.

The CfE has been attacked as the reason for Scotland's supposedly



An abject failure in education? Hmm...

FACT CHECK

The Curriculum for Excellence has been attacked as the reason for Scotland's supposedly 'poor' PISA attainments

"poor" PISA attainments – Finland's experience suggests otherwise.

In maths, Scotland scored 489 points, a dip of two points since 2015. This dip is not statistically significant. For reference, 489 is also the OECD rich country attainment average for maths. While it might be a criticism that Scotland is average for maths, it is hardly indicative of systemic failure. Scotland is still ahead of Russia (488), the United States (478) and Israel (463) in maths – all nations with a significant scientific and technological record.

Note also that the domestic attainment gap in Scotland between maths scores of the poorest and wealthiest pupils has reduced from 87 to 83 points.

In science, Scotland scored 490, down seven points which is statistically significant but still slightly above the OECD average of 489. It is also the same score as Norway. England also saw a fall in its science score though averaged 507. Again, it is possible to argue Scotland should do better, but it is certainly not legitimate to say this score represents existential failure.

OVERALL SCHOOL ATTAINMENT

THE PISA scores are a snapshot of attainment at age 15 only. The real test of an education system is how it turns out pupils at the end of secondary education – the numbers successfully achieving relevant qualifications and going on to jobs, university or college. Here Scotland scores well.

The percentage of Scottish school pupils leaving with SCQF Level 6 (Higher) or 7 (Advanced Higher) passes rose steadily from 50.4% in 2009/10 to 62.2% in 2017/19. While there are year-to-year variations

in Higher pass rates (they dipped in 2019), the overall trend in the percentage of pupils attaining Level 6 and 7 qualifications is upward. On any reasonable grounds, that is progress.

Another obvious benchmark is the proportion of secondary pupils completing S6. This has risen from 54.9% in 2009/10 to 62.7% in 2017/19. The percentage of leavers from Scottish state schools going on to university or further education was 55.9% in 2007/8 (when the first SNP Government was elected) to 67.6% in 2017/18 – that's an impressive two-thirds of school leavers going into advanced education.

There remain attainment issues for pupils from the very poorest families. But the Scottish Government has responded to this problem in 2015 by investing an additional £500 million in spending in targeted schools where pupil attainment is at its lowest.

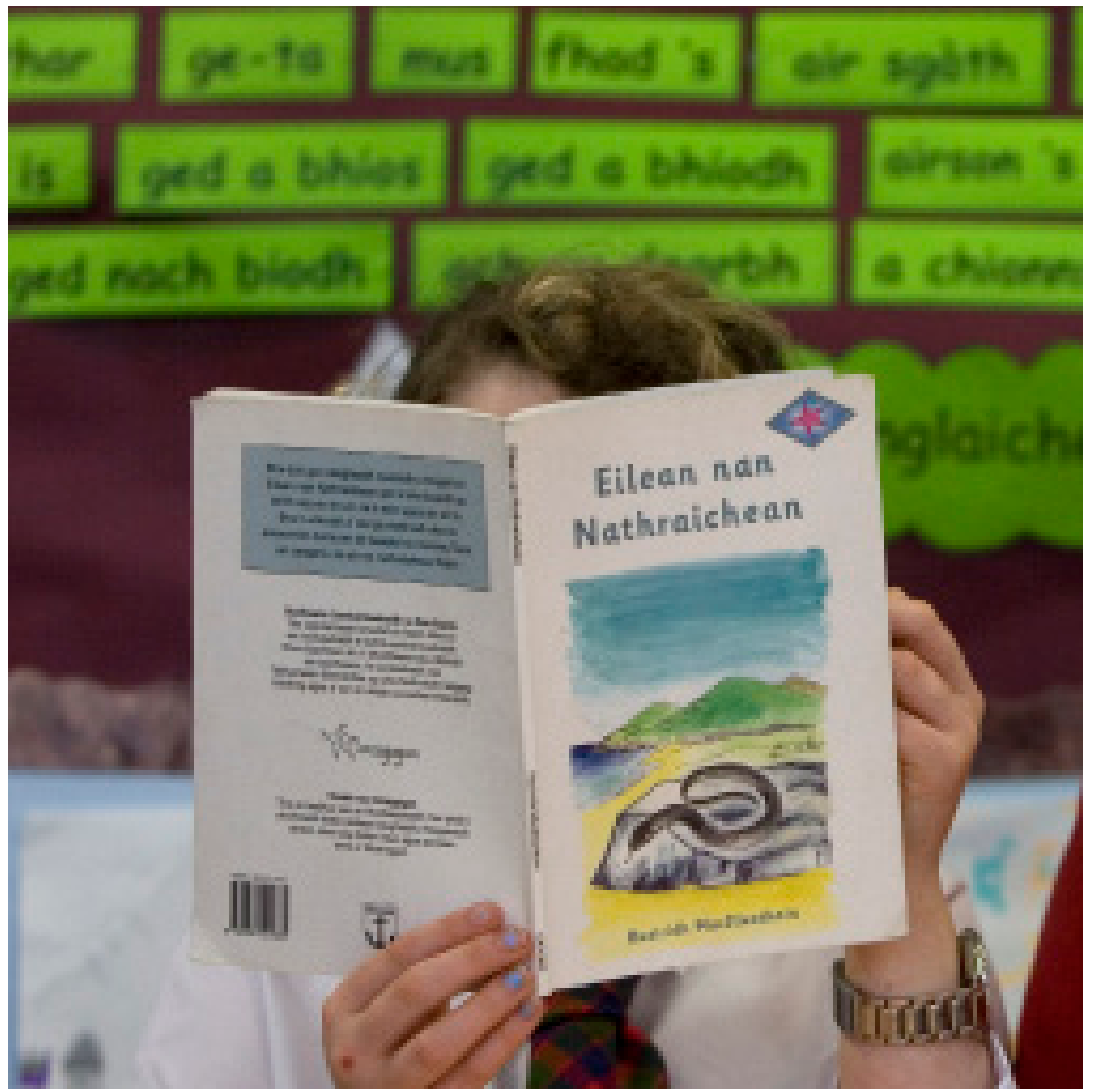
FACT-CHECK RATING: FALSE

Jess needs to go back to school when it comes to knowing what is happening in Scotland...

✗ false

Learning Gaelic will be terrible for Scottish pupils!

Any guesses for who made this claim? (Yep, the Tories of course)



CLAIM:

“Educating pupils in Gaelic could harm academic achievement say Scottish Tories” - Scotsman tweet January 23, 2020

DOORSTEP ANSWER:

THERE are no plans for compulsory Gaelic-medium education – only that P1 pupils in the Western Isles should be taught in Gaelic as a right and that all pupils will be bilingual after P4. Bilingualism is an advantage, not a disadvantage.

BACKGROUND

ACCORDING to Liz Smith MSP, the Scottish Conservative shadow education spokesperson, children’s education could suffer when Gaelic becomes the de facto main teaching language for all P1 pupils in the Western Isles this summer. Smith describes the new policy as a “deeply troubling step and one that could put children in the Western Isles at a distinct disadvantage to their peers”.

OPTING OUT, NOT OPTING IN

SMITH is factually wrong on several counts. To start with, Gaelic is not being imposed on any pupil. The change in policy only switches the onus for opting out. To date, parents had to opt into Gaelic-medium education (GME) on the islands, where lessons in English were the default. But the steady rise in demand for GME has reached the stage where a majority want to opt in.

As a result, Comhairle nan Eilean Siar (Western Isles Council) has decided to switch to GME as the default P1 teaching language and ask parents to opt out – it is the

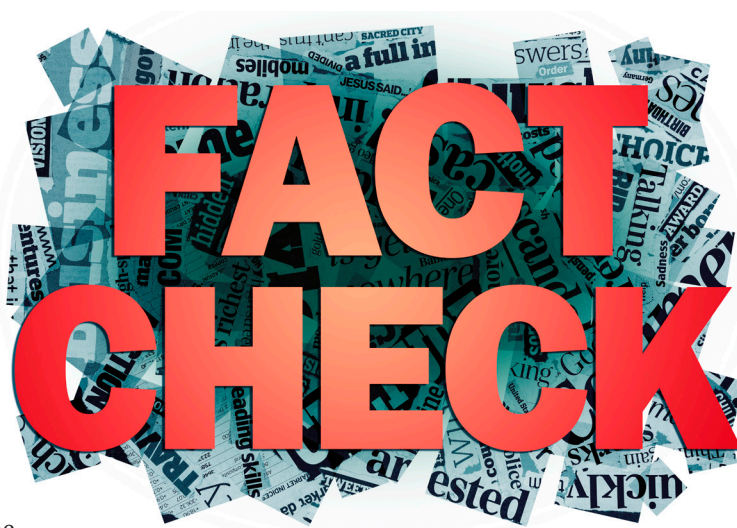
only council to do so. However, P1 pupils will still be instructed mainly in English if their parents request it. For all pupils, instruction in English will be introduced at P4 with the aim of giving children a bilingual education.

IS BILINGUALISM A DISADVANTAGE?

WILL the policy of Comhairle nan Eilean Siar to make children bilingual in Gaelic and English result in any disadvantage for pupils? On the contrary, more than half of all people on the planet – estimates vary from 60 to 75% – speak at least two languages. The benefits of bi- and multilingualism are obvious: extended cultural awareness, improved job prospects, ease of travel and numerous cognitive gains ranging from better memory and defence against dementia.

Though the benefits of learning a second or more language seem intuitive, is there in fact any scientific proof it is so? The answer is yes. Researchers at the University of Edinburgh published the results of a major study into the cognitive effects of learning one or more extra languages in 2014. The researchers looked at a group of 853 people who had been given intelligence tests in 1947 at the age of 11 and were then retested when they were in their 70s. Almost a third of the cohort spoke a second language.

The Edinburgh University researchers found that people speaking two languages (bilingual)



The benefits of being bilingual are obvious

performed significantly better than predicted from their baseline cognitive abilities at the age of 11. The strongest associations were seen in tests of general intelligence and reading. The researchers concluded that their results suggest a protective effect of bilingualism against age-related cognitive decline independent of childhood intelligence, including in those who acquired their second language in adulthood.

WHY GAELIC?

IS learning Gaelic a disadvantage over, say, learning any other language? Certainly, the global Gaelic-speaking community is small in comparison to other language groups. According to the 2011 census, there are 57,000 native Gaelic speakers, while some 87,000 people in total claim some knowledge of the language.

On the other hand, Gaelic is a growing language community. Between 2014 and 2018, GME has grown from 3583 pupils (5.3 per 1000) to 4343 pupils (6.3 per 1000). GME is already taught in dedicated Gaelic primary schools in Glasgow, Edinburgh, Portree in Skye, Inverness and Lochaber and in units within English-medium schools across Scotland. Edinburgh Council is to open a second GME primary school in 2023 and a secondary GME in 2024.

Gaelic also has a vibrant written and performed culture and represents a distinct Scottish historic community that has influenced the entire Scottish nation. From that perspective, no-one can possibly be “disadvantaged” by knowing Gaelic. Speaking Gaelic did not disadvantage people such as the banker Sir Iain Noble, former energy minister Brian Wilson, former Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont, President Trump’s mother Mary Anne MacLeod, Donnie Munro of the band Runrig, novelist Alistair MacLean who sold 150 books in English despite that being his second tongue, iconic cartoonist Ewen Bain, Karachi-born TV presenter Ali Abbasi and famous poets Iain Crichton Smith and Sorley MacLean.

FACT-CHECK RATING: FALSE

And offensive...

 **false**