

**Nicola Sturgeon 25 February 2015**

**“An education system for everyone – the foundation of a fairer Scotland”**

As the last year has demonstrated, there is a huge public appetite, right across Scotland, for forums where people can discuss and debate the big issues of the day. The David Hume Institute has been helping to meet that need for 30 years now. Today, in post-referendum Scotland, it seems to me that your work is more relevant than ever before. And so I'm really delighted to have this opportunity to address you tonight.

This winter lecture series is focussed on the sort of country we want Scotland to be.

That, of course, is the big question that dominated last year's referendum campaign, and which continues to dominate our politics and our society today.

When we were all choosing whether to vote yes or to vote no last year, what we were doing was engaging in one of the most passionate, wide-ranging and fundamental debates that any nation can have; we all had to ask ourselves what kind of country we wanted to live in; we thought about our concerns about the present and hopes and dreams for the future and came to a conclusion about the best way to build the kind of country we wanted Scotland to be.

And anybody who travelled the country last year, as I did, would have heard time and time again - from no voters as well as from yes voters - an overwhelming desire to be part of a process of building a better and fairer society as well as a wealthier one.

Now, the referendum didn't turn out the way I hoped it would but, nevertheless, that fundamental process of assessment and reassessment that the campaign represented has strengthened and energised our country. The challenge now is to harness that energy and use it to build a better Scotland - in other words, to turn those aspirations for a better and fairer society into a reality.

When I became First Minister, nearly 100 days ago, I set out a programme for government designed to help achieve that. It is based on the three priorities of prosperity, participation and fairness.

We aim to build prosperity – because a strong economy underpins the wellbeing of every community in Scotland.

We will encourage participation – because we want to empower and enable people to improve their own lives and those of others in their community.

And we will promote fairness. We all know that there are currently too many barriers to opportunity standing in the way of far too many people - whether as a result of background, income, geography, gender, or disability.

We also know that inequality is bad, not just for individuals and society, but for our economy as well. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development estimates that inequality reduced the UK's economic growth by 9 percentage points between 1990 and 2010. So to put it simply, if we succeed in making Scotland more equal, we will raise not only the life chances of this and the next generation, we will also enhance our economic prosperity.

That is why I believe so strongly that the objective of a strong economy and a fairer society should no longer be seen as they have often been in the past - as competing - but instead as mutually reinforcing.

As leader of the Scottish Government, I am determined that we will use all of the powers we have at our disposal, now and in the future, to progress these twin goals. But of course, we cannot ignore the wider context we are working in.

The hard fact of the matter is that the current UK Government's spending cuts - largely endorsed by the main opposition party - make efforts to tackle inequality more difficult. The cuts we have seen so far have had a disproportionate impact on women, disabled people and families on low incomes. The UK parties' plans for even more austerity in the coming parliament would hurt those groups once again. So it seems to me that no politician can be taken seriously about wanting to tackle poverty and inequality, unless they are also prepared to challenge the current Westminster model of austerity.

It's also important to make that challenge because austerity has been bad, not just for many individuals, but for the economy as a whole. For example over the course of this parliament, low growth is the major reason that the government has missed its deficit reduction targets by a total of £150 billion.

That's why the Scottish Government has set out an alternative approach – one based on limiting real terms spending growth to 0.5% a year. That policy - of very modest spending increases instead of cuts - would still see the debt and deficit reduce as a proportion of national income in every year from 2016-17; but it would also free up an additional £180 billion across the UK over the next parliament, which could be used to invest in infrastructure and innovation, protect the public services we all depend on and ease the pressure on the most vulnerable.

By offering an alternative to the austerity agenda, we can ensure that fiscal consolidation is consistent with a wider vision of society - a society which strives to become more equal, as part of becoming more prosperous and fiscally sustainable.

And the issue I want to talk about tonight - education - is a vital part of achieving that vision. Education underpins all of our efforts to create a fairer, more productive, more prosperous society.

It is - and will continue to be - a defining priority for the Government I lead. It's also a personal passion.

The education I got - at Dreghorn Primary and Greenwood Academy in Ayrshire and at Glasgow University - is the major reason why I'm able to stand here today as the First Minister of Scotland.

So it's important to me personally that every young girl and boy growing up today – regardless of their background – gets the same chances that I did.

This evening, I'll talk about how we achieve that. I'll focus in turn on the early years; on school education; and then on opportunities for young adults.

In doing that, I'll point out a number of areas where we need to do better. But my starting point is an optimistic one.

In many respects, this country is incredibly fortunate. A commitment to education is engrained in Scotland's history; it's part of our DNA – part of our very sense of ourselves. We pioneered the idea of universal access to school education and sparked the Enlightenment, the spirit of which still inspires the David Hume Institute. Hume himself argued that “The sweetest...path of life leads through the avenues of science and learning”.

And we found out relatively early on, that education doesn't just sweeten life or bring enlightenment. Widening access to education also brings economic benefits. During the 18th and 19th centuries, because Scotland educated more people to a higher level than most other countries, we pioneered the industrial revolution, and provided a disproportionate number of the world's great thinkers, scientists and inventors.

In many ways, our education system still lives up to its reputation. In fact, it's better than ever. More children are better educated today than at any previous time in our history. Higher exam passes are at record levels. Curriculum for Excellence is being successfully implemented. School leaver destinations are the best on record - of the students who left school in 2014, more than 9 out of 10 are in employment, training or education. We have more world class universities per head of population than any other country in the world except Switzerland.

In fact, a survey last summer from the Office of National Statistics showed that in terms of college and university qualifications, Scotland has the best educated workforce of any country anywhere in Europe. If you think about it, that is a remarkable asset. It's an incredible advantage for Scottish businesses looking to recruit, or for overseas companies looking to invest. And it provides a firm foundation for future economic growth.

But we all know, I think, that although these achievements are hugely significant, they're not the whole story. And so today I want to highlight some of the areas where we can and must do better. In particular, I want to focus on how inequality in attainment – starting in the very early years, and persisting into adulthood - is weakening our society, holding back our economy, and constraining the life chances of too many of our fellow citizens.

The basic problem can be illustrated with just one statistic. In terms of qualifications, school leavers from the most deprived 20% of areas in Scotland currently only do half as well as school leavers from the least deprived areas.

None of us should accept a situation where so many people are unable to realise their full potential. It lets too many young people down. And it diminishes all of us.

Those figures relate to school education. But we know that the challenges start before that. The Growing Up in Scotland Study calculated the difference in vocabulary between children from low-income and high-income households. By the age of 5, the gap was already 13 months.

So the first step towards tackling the attainment gap, is to make sure that every child gets the best possible start in life.

I'll talk about formal care and learning in a moment, but of course, the issue is much broader than that. We need to think about the wellbeing of babies and parents from pregnancy onwards. That's one reason why our Early Years Collaborative is so important. Since it was established in 2012, it has brought together health workers, carers, parenting organisations and others from every part of the country. It ensures that evidence and research is shared, so that approaches which work in one area can quickly be adopted across Scotland.

The collaborative has already identified several priorities and community planning partnerships are now working on these. For example we're looking at better early assistance for pregnant mothers; encouraging better attachment between mothers and young children; and helping parents to support learning.

All of this will have a big impact – not simply on attainment, but on children's happiness and emotional wellbeing.

The collaborative is attracting international attention. It is helping to ensure that good practice becomes common practice. It is already helping to create a better future for young children in Scotland.

The establishment of the collaborative has accompanied a significant investment in early years learning and care. In August, we are further extending funded childcare places to disadvantaged 2 year olds. We have already expanded the amount of care available to 3 and 4 year olds – from 412 hours a year in 2007 to 600 hours now.

By the end of the next parliament, it will be more than 1100 hours – meaning that funded childcare will match primary school provision.

There are two things about this increase. The first is its economic impact. I was quite struck by a comment President Obama made in his State of the Union Address last month. He argued that "it's time we stop treating childcare as a side issue, or as a women's issue, and treat it like the national economic priority that it is for all of us."

He was making the fundamental point that childcare is an economic necessity - I would describe it as essential economic infrastructure, as fundamental in its own way to enabling parents to work as the transport infrastructure that gets them there every morning. Better childcare empowers parents – especially mothers – to return to work. That's why last November the CBI cited more childcare as the top priority in their "Plan for a Better Off Britain".

But the second point is perhaps even more important. Childcare isn't just about enabling parents to return to work. It's about providing the caring and learning environment that every child needs in order to flourish.

We already know that, by age 5, children attending early learning and childcare settings with high inspection ratings have better vocabulary skills than their peers. That finding applies regardless of their families' income level. We also know that vocabulary skills are a key indicator of later attainment.

So by improving the quality of learning and care – for example by supporting workforce guidance and development - we will improve attainment and reduce social inequalities. That's why Curriculum for Excellence does not start in primary 1; it starts at age 3, in our nurseries.

The key point is this. Early Learning and childcare promotes opportunity twice over. It enables parents to enter the workforce now and provide a better standard of living for their children, and it helps all children to make the most of their potential later in life. It's one of the best investments any Government can possibly make. In my view, it is central to any enlightened view of what modern Scotland should look like and that is why it is such a driving priority of my government. That's why I can confirm today my intention that spending on early learning and care will double over the course of the next parliament.

That's in addition to the extra capital spending we will provide. The great capital investment project of this parliament is the Queensferry Crossing. If I am re-elected as First Minister next year, I intend that the great infrastructure project of the next parliament will be even more transformational.

It will be the investment in care and learning facilities needed to ensure our early years provision matches our primary school provision. These facilities will create a bridge to a better future for children and families across the country.

High quality learning and care in the early years will help to reduce the attainment gap in schools. But we need to do more in schools as well.

I've seen in schools across the country just how much all of us owe to the passion, commitment and expertise of Scotland's teachers. That's why we are so determined to invest to protect teacher numbers across Scotland.

Teachers are the major reason for the significant successes I mentioned earlier – the implementation of curriculum for excellence, the record exam results, and the high number of school leavers in education, employment or training.

But we know we need to do more to support teachers and schools – especially schools with significant intakes from more deprived communities.

In January we introduced free school meals for all primary school children. Making nutritious lunches available to everyone – without any danger of the stigma which can sometimes come from means testing – is an investment which will benefit every child's health, education and wellbeing.

And we're making a concerted effort to address inequalities in attainment

Two days ago I visited Blue Gate Fields Junior School in Tower Hamlets, which participated in the London Challenge attainment initiative.

70% of its pupils are eligible for free school meals – that's almost three times the average for England. But notwithstanding that, it is in the top 20% of schools in England for reading, and in the top 40% for writing and maths. Ofsted has reported that it is "an outstanding school in almost every respect".

Now, some of the press coverage around my visit expressed surprise that I was learning from London. But I've never pretended that Scotland has a monopoly on wisdom in education or any other area. Just as other countries study Scotland's Curriculum for Excellence or the Early Years Collaborative, so we should be prepared to adopt good ideas from elsewhere. We're not just looking to London – in Canada, for example, Ontario has achieved dramatic improvements in literacy and numeracy.

Not all of the lessons of the London Challenge can or should be used in Scotland. But some of them are applicable. For example it's clear that leadership has been a huge factor in the success of many of the London Challenge Schools. I also see great examples of good leadership in schools across Scotland. So we're looking to build on that. It's why I announced on Monday that the new Qualification for Headship, which will come on stream later this year, will be mandatory for all head teachers by 2018/19.

One lesson that London and Ontario clearly show, is that when efforts and resources are targeted, it's possible to achieve dramatic improvements.

That's why I launched the £100 million Scottish Attainment Challenge two weeks ago. The fund will be focussed initially on primary schools in the local authorities with the highest concentration of pupils living in deprived areas.

The fund aims to improve literacy, numeracy, health and wellbeing— because we know that if we can close the attainment gap when children are young, the benefits will continue into secondary school and beyond.

But the real prize is not simply the additional £100 million we are investing. It lies in the potential to apply what we learn from the programme across the entirety of the £4 billion of the school education budget.

The Challenge will add to the other steps we have taken – for example our national numeracy and literacy drive “Read, Write, Count”, and our funding of attainment advisers in every local authority.

What the Scottish Attainment Challenge does – together with those other steps - is provide a new impetus and focus on closing the attainment gap. We're making support available to all schools; and we're also placing additional assistance and resources where they are needed most. We're raising standards everywhere; but we want to see the biggest improvements in the places with the greatest need. That, in my view, is a moral imperative. It is not acceptable that any child is held back because of the background or the circumstances of their birth.

That's all part of a wider ambition to ensure that everyone has a fair chance of skilled, fulfilling, productive employment.

Free higher education tuition has become a touchstone of this government's commitment to equality of opportunity. As someone who benefited hugely from it, I am determined to preserve the principle that access to university is decided by your ability to learn; not your ability to pay.

But protecting the principle of free education, vital though it is, is not enough in itself. We also need to remove the other barriers that prevent too many of the young people from our most deprived communities pursuing a university education. And we have work to do - children from the most deprived fifth of communities, make up only 1/7 of university undergraduate intakes.

So when I became First Minister, I set out the clear ambition that a child born today in one of our most deprived communities should, by the time he or she leaves school, have the same chance of going to university as a child born in one of our least deprived communities.

And let me stress that - the same chance. Not just a better chance than they have today. But the same chance as anyone else. In other words, where you are born and brought up and your parents' circumstances must not be the driver of how likely you are to go to university.

The work I've outlined in early years and in our schools will be fundamental to achieving that ambition. So will the current work being done by the Government and our universities. For example, this year the Government funded 730 additional places at our universities to widen access for students from more disadvantaged backgrounds.

But to ensure we're doing everything we can, as early as we can, we are establishing a Commission on Widening Access. The Commission will propose milestones, measure progress, and identify improvements. It will be central to ensuring that our ambition of equal access within a generation becomes a reality.

And that is part of a far broader approach to post-school learning. After all, the key test we need to apply is not whether learning takes place in college, at work or in university. It's whether the learning is relevant, engaging and widens people's opportunities.

So since 2007 we've focused colleges on promoting skills which help people to work, and which support economic growth. The number of students gaining recognised qualifications has increased by a third in the last 5 years.

We retained educational maintenance allowances, when the UK government scrapped them in England; we have invested in modern apprenticeships which are directly tied to job opportunities; and we have launched a national campaign to promote youth employment.

All of this has achieved results. We currently outperform the rest of the UK on all three youth employment indicators – we have higher youth employment, lower unemployment and lower economic inactivity rates.

But we know we need to do more. Last year, Sir Ian Wood's Commission into Developing Scotland's Young Workforce published its final report. We are investing £28m in this year and next, to implement the review's recommendations. We have already established an "Invest in Young People" group which is chaired by Rob Woodward of STV. It brings together industry, local government, further education and trade unions.

It's worth setting out what this all will mean.

- It will mean a closer relationship between industry and education, enabling courses to reflect what companies need.
- It will mean more apprenticeships – up from 25,000 a year at present to 30,000 a year by 2020.
- It will mean better careers advice at an earlier age.
- It will mean support for employers – for example if they want to gain the investors in people accolade.
- And it will mean concerted action to improve participation of under-represented groups. So the gender segregation we see in too many modern apprenticeships – where only 5% of engineering apprentices are female, and just 3% of childcare apprentices are male – will hopefully diminish and then disappear. Men and women will choose work which matches their talents and interests, rather than other people's outdated expectations.

So from supporting mothers in the early stages of pregnancy, to helping people gain their first experience of work, the overriding message I want to leave you with tonight is that my government is committed to doing everything it can to promote opportunities and reduce inequalities.

Of course, it's not something that Government, schools, colleges and universities can do on our own – although our role is hugely important. It's got to be part of a shared endeavour.

Earlier today, I announced a further £6m of funding for the Scottish Council of Voluntary Organisations, to deliver its Community Jobs Scotland programme. Using that money, it will deliver at least 1,000 job training opportunities across all 32 local authorities. At least 300 of them will be

for vulnerable young people, such as care leavers and ex-offenders. A further 100 will be for disabled people. It's a good example of how the third sector is working with us to help young people into work.

Businesses also have an important part to play. When we launched the "Make Young People Your Business" campaign, we got a magnificent response from many companies – one which has made a big difference to many young people's lives. And of course, what those companies found, was that employing young people brought significant benefits. Doing the right thing, was in their own best interests.

Clearly, business won't have a role in every part of education. But we will seek to work with them on issues where they do have an interest – whether it's entrepreneurship in schools or the delivery of modern apprenticeships.

The approach to education I have outlined tonight is part of a wider approach to sustainable growth – something which will also be clear in the Government Economic Strategy which we will publish next week.

But, fundamentally, it is about achieving the basic ideal that I think of when I am asked the question - what kind of country do you want Scotland to be? To put it simply, I want Scotland to be a land of opportunity - a country where every individual, regardless of background or race or gender, gets the chance to fulfil his or her potential.

Can that be achieved? Yes, I believe it can and education is the key. I quoted David Hume earlier. In the same passage I quoted, he goes on to say that "whoever can either remove any obstruction (to education), or open up any new prospect, ought...to be esteemed a benefactor to mankind."

The removal of obstructions to education, and the opening up of new opportunities, has been the focus of many of the major initiatives of my first 100 days as First Minister. It is a subject which will receive sustained attention for as long as my government holds office. Because education is not just part of our sense of ourselves, it's the key to a better future for young people growing up in Scotland today. And it is at the heart of the fairer and more prosperous Scotland that all of us seek to build.