

INTERVIEW WITH SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE
ON THE 2021 SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS

FOR: THE SCOTTISH QUALIFICATIONS AUTHORITY HELEN CAMPBELL

PROG: DRIVETIME SERVICE: RADIO SCOTLAND

DATE: 10.8.21 TIME: 1705 DURATION: 8 MINS 40 SECS SERIAL: 080693

JOHN BEATTIE

Technically, exam results day today but it's very different from previous years, isn't it, that's because students, for the most part, already know their grades after exams were cancelled for the second year running, with grades based on teacher judgement instead. Pass rates are down but there are a record number of A grades. Earlier in the programme, we heard from the Scottish Conservative MSP, Oliver Mundell.

OLIVER MUNDELL MSP, Scottish Conservatives

We were told that this year, the grades would be based on teacher judgement but instead, we've seen teachers pressured... there's been a pressure within the system, that we've... the Scottish Conservatives have pointed out in Holyrood several times and raised concerns that exactly this was going to happen this year, that young people from poorer backgrounds were going to be disadvantaged. There's been a pressure within the system to push grades back down and that's resulted in

many people in some of the toughest schools getting grades that were lower than people would have got last year under a similar system.

JOHN BEATTIE

Well, that was Oliver Mundell. Education Secretary, Shirley-Anne Somerville, is with us. Hello, Shirley-Anne, thanks for talking to us.

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP, Education Secretary

Hi there.

JOHN BEATTIE

What do you make of that, then, that allegation, first of all, teachers in historically low achieving schools were pressurised to downgrade, is that true or false?

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP

No, it's not, and I'm desperately disappointed that Oliver Mundell and the Scottish Conservatives continue to peddle this, on a day where we should be celebrating the success of our young people after a very, very difficult year. There was no pressure to change grades. What there was, was, I think, quite rightly, a process within local authorities to check on quality control, so teachers were asked to look at what had happened in previous years but then, if they still felt that a grade was the right grade that they'd been given, then it wasn't changed... because what Oliver Mundell is actually saying is, people within local authorities, within schools themselves, I don't know who because he's provided no evidence, actually deliberately went out and downgraded young people. Now, that's a terrible accusation to make on results day, when we should be celebrating what young people have achieved in a very, very difficult year.

JOHN BEATTIE

Yes. Okay, so, you've just told me that we did compare to previous years and we did also, didn't we, at Higher, in the SIMD, quarter one, pupil grades fell 2.5% and it was a 1.1% fall for the richest pupils. So, the Scottish Conservatives were right, weren't they, that our poorer pupils had the bigger drop in results, that's true, isn't it?

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP

So, what we have seen is a slight variation in the last year with the attainment levels but, if you look at it within...

JOHN BEATTIE (interrupts)

But was it true?

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP

Well, what we have seen is, changes within the variation. So, I'll go onto the details, because I do accept that there has been a slight increase in the attainment gap this year but, when you look at it from a historical context, and it's important to do that over time, not just taking one point on one date that's convenient but we look at 2021... it's under 8%. We have an attainment gap in 2019... it was 17%. Previous to that, we had similar large gaps. So, what we have seen is a slight dip from last year but, in a historical context, we are making very, very good progress. That's because of the money the Scottish Government has put in and what we'll continue to do, with another billion pounds worth of expenditure coming in but again, I go back to the point that the grades this year were determined on demonstrated achievement and teacher judgement. So, I trust what teachers have given young people as their grades, that was the system that was developed with teachers, with parents and with young people and we should

trust that teacher judgement going forward and support our teachers, who have dealt with this under the most difficult circumstances as well, rather than castigating or accusing anyone of changing results to somehow push grades back down, that's really, really unfair to students and to teachers.

JOHN BEATTIE

Well, I think people are just trying to get to the truth, and politics is a dirty business. So, let's go back... you've got... what do you say to the poor students... poor pupils in Scotland who have been downgraded, do you tell them, 'this is the right way of doing it this year' or was just last year...

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP (interrupts)

No, no, sorry...

JOHN BEATTIE (interrupts)

No, hang on. Was last year's figure inflated?

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP

No one has been downgraded, John, I'm sorry...

JOHN BEATTIE (interrupts)

Okay, well, no... okay...

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP (interrupts)

... we really need to be very careful about this...

JOHN BEATTIE (interrupts)

Fine, I agree with the terminology...

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP (interrupts)

... because young people have had...

JOHN BEATTIE (interrupts)

... you're absolutely correct... but the expected results are below what they might have been... the fall in poorer pupils is bigger.

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP

The results are exactly what the teachers' professional judgement decided that a young person would have on their demonstrated attainment. Now, the demonstrated attainment is very important, because it allowed young people to demonstrate what they could do, the teacher judgement was there to be part of that. Now, this was a system, under very, very difficult circumstances, that has produced fair and credible results. We just saw very, many Scottish employers and stakeholders coming out yesterday saying, 'this is a fair and credible system, we support the results you had, good luck to the young people for the results day and good luck for the rest of your lives'. What a shame that some Scottish opposition politicians can't raise their game and also congratulate our young people and celebrate their success, rather than castigating around accusations that they don't have any evidence for.

JOHN BEATTIE

We can only compare to last year and the year before at the moment, and previous years. Was last year an anomaly?

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP

So, last year was a very, very exceptional year. Again, that was done in a slightly different way. So, this year, it was done on demonstrated attainment, with teacher judgement. Last year, there couldn't be any demonstrated attainment, we had to go just on teacher estimates for what they could achieve. So, it's a slightly different way now. Therefore, we're not surprised if there's some variation from year to year because

we have, necessarily, been using different systems. So, again, I'm not surprised that there are some changes from last year to this year, but last year's exams were credible, that's demonstrated by the fact that young people went on and could use those exam results within universities and go on to college courses and go into apprenticeships. So, last year was a very difficult set of circumstances, this year has, again, been difficult but we've had a slightly different system in place. So, of course, politicians and correspondents can look and compare from year to year, but I think it's important that if we're focusing on this year, we know that the system is fair and it's credible, young people can have great pride in what they have, which is a record number of passes at Higher and Advanced Higher and they should take real credit for that, given the really, really difficult circumstances that they've had this year.

JOHN BEATTIE

Are exams coming back?

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP

So, I'll make an announcement for what's happening for next year, later this week but, in the longer term, we will look at whether we need to make some changes to what young people face. So, there's a degree of debate within the education community around whether we could have more continuous assessments, as well as exams. So, I can't see a point where we would ever get rid of exams entirely, I don't think that's a system which we could see, but do we have to maybe look at other models, we've got an OECD report coming out that may give us options to look at. I don't know what that will say yet, but we need to look at that in the longer term but, for next year, I'll be making an announcement on that within the week, ready for the schools going back in the vast majority of

council areas next week.

JOHN BEATTIE

But another model coming up?

SHIRLEY-ANNE SOMERVILLE MSP

Not necessarily another model coming up. What we've looked at, with parents and with teachers and with young people, in particular, is, 'can we go back to the usual set of exams, what contingencies do we need to have in place if there are going to be any changes, what areas can we learn from that we might need to slightly adapt?' Bearing in mind that although we're changing some of the regulations around self-isolation so that young people won't have the same disruption to their education, they're still not going back to a usual year. So, what changes can we make to allow young people to have the absolute best chance of being able to... just as they've done this year, be able to prove how much they've learned, how much they can succeed within school and then importantly, as they have done today, to celebrate that success before moving on to the next stage of their lives.

JOHN BEATTIE

Okay. Education Secretary, Shirley-Anne Somerville, thank you very much, indeed. Drivetime, your texts are welcome, 80295 is the number.
