

# Diary of an SNP First Minister: A Chronopolitics of Proximity and Priorities

HANNAH GRAHAM

## Abstract

This article provides a content analysis of Nicola Sturgeon's first ministerial diaries in the final two years of her leadership (April 2021–March 2023). As first minister, to whom and what did she give her time—which issues and interest groups had access? Which didn't? Or, who and what may be missing? An audience with a national leader can be indicative of priorities and potential for influence—as can its absence. The lens of chronopolitics—the politics of time—is used here to consider twenty-four months of diaries, with 681 entries. Some key social and political issues in Scotland were kept away from the FM's meetings and delegated to other ministers to oversee, whereas other issues appear to be signature priorities, including climate and the environment, economy and finance, culture, and health and Covid-19.

**Keywords:** First minister, SNP, Nicola Sturgeon, diaries, time, chronopolitics

## Introduction

MINISTERIAL DIARIES offer telling insights about how political leaders spend their time. While there is considerable commentary and research on the Scottish Parliament, there has been far less on the role of the Scottish first minister (FM) and those who seek to access and influence them.<sup>1</sup> Analysis of Scottish ministerial diaries is practically non-existent, despite them being routinely made publicly available by calendar month. In this article, these diaries are analysed using the conceptual lens of chronopolitics—the politics of time—to consider how Nicola Sturgeon spent her time as an SNP FM in the final years of her leadership. A repetitive provocation from opposition benches during her tenure was 'get back to the day job!', heard at FMQs often in the heat of another stramash along constitutional political lines and incessantly repeated on social media. Here, the 'day job' of FM is firmly in focus. To what extent do priorities which are emphasised in Nicola Sturgeon's public and parliamentary communications feature in her diaries of meetings and engagements? In private and in public

settings, to whom and what did she give her time—which issues and interest groups had proximity? Which didn't? Or, who and what may be missing? This article analyses ministerial diaries to make a modest, but original contribution in response to these questions. If 'time and temporalities enmesh in relations of power', there is utility in taking a time-perspective on political leadership here.<sup>2</sup>

In terms of method, this research comprises secondary data analysis of Scottish government ministerial diaries, having received ethical approval from the University of Stirling. Ministerial diaries were downloaded as Excel spreadsheets from the Scottish government website, where they are made publicly available by calendar month. In this article, the sample consists of twenty-four calendar month diaries and 681 diary entries for Nicola Sturgeon, spanning a two-year period from April 2021 to March 2023—the final two years in which she was FM and SNP leader. Diary entries include: visits, meetings, press conferences or media interviews, dinners, receptions, exhibitions, briefings, conferences, phone calls and video calls. These were analysed using the

<sup>1</sup>G. Leydier 'The Scottish first ministers from 1999 to 2014: role, power and leadership', *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique*, vol. 24, no. 4, 2019, pp. 1–16.

<sup>2</sup>M. Lilja, *Constructive Resistance: Repetitions, Emotions and Time*, Lanham MD, Rowman & Littlefield, 2021, p. 124.

method of content analysis. Diary entries vary significantly per calendar month, with some months having as few as ten entries (July 2022) and some as many as 106 entries (November 2021). In the spreadsheets, most diary entry subjects are accurately thematically categorised by the Scottish government; however, some inconsistencies and occasional inaccuracies (mis-categorisation) were identified, cross-checked and corrected. Some diary entries warranted having two coding categorisations. Selected examples of Scottish government ministerial diary entries from August 2022 are quoted here to illustrate, with associated 'subject' coding categories in brackets:

- 24/08/2022: Meeting with Mayor of Greater Manchester Andy Burnham [Economy].
- 25/08/2022: Memorial service for Sir Sean Connery [Memorial].
- 26/08/2022: Visit and tour of the UNICEF supply division, Copenhagen [International Development].
- 26/08/2022: Bilateral meeting with Foreign Minister of Denmark Jeppe Kofod [International Relations].

More information on these interactions and content of meetings may be gained from other publicly available sources (for example, news media and freedom of information (FOI) publications), but the content of all ministerial diary entries in spreadsheets is typically very concise.<sup>3</sup>

Learning from one of few academic journal articles on ministerial diary analysis, Cullerton and colleagues suggest these are 'unique datasets that have not previously been systematically analysed', while acknowledging important caveats like how diaries 'do not capture all of the interactions ministers undertake and we have no way of knowing how closely the diaries represent a minister's actual day.'<sup>4</sup> Indeed, it is wholly expected that Nicola Sturgeon interacted and met with others in Scottish government

(including ministers, civil servants, and special advisers), her constituency and political party, without this needing to be recorded in her diary as FM.

Access is imperative to influence and agenda setting. Various diary entries imply an advocacy agenda by people and groups who might wish to influence the FM and Scottish government on a particular issue or interest. First ministers often discuss their own political and policy agendas with interest groups, seeking to influence their views. As such, some diary entries have been cross-referenced with three other publicly available resources to gain more information about why they interacted with the FM and the topic of focus: the Scottish Parliament lobbying register; the Scottish government first minister's speeches collection; and the Scottish government FOI disclosure log publications about first ministerial meetings. For the two-year period of April 2021–March 2023, there are 100 registered entries of regulated lobbying of Nicola Sturgeon as FM. These are mostly by charities, trade unions, businesses and energy companies. With very few exceptions, professional lobbyists are absent from Sturgeon's diaries and lobbying register entries.

In chronopolitics scholarship, the 'time of politics' regarding the wider context of a period of time influences how political leaders interpret and experience that time, which in turn influences decision making and policy priorities. Two factors are salient given the timeframe of the sample discussed here. It comes immediately after the first year of the Covid pandemic and lockdown restrictions, a landmark time in Scottish and global history constituting a prime example of what is called 'before-and-after periodisation'. Political priorities and activities during an emergency (lockdown restrictions at the height of the pandemic) will differ from priorities and activities emerging from that period, with complex collateral consequences to be managed, like systemic backlogs and delays.

Secondly, the wider Scottish and British political context is pertinent. During Sturgeon's time as FM and SNP leader from 2014–2023, there were five UK prime ministers. There were eight elections, in which the SNP fared well: 2015, 2017 and 2019 UK general elections; 2016 and 2021 Scottish Parliament elections; 2017 and 2022 council elections; and the 2019

<sup>3</sup>Scottish Government, 'First Minister's August 2022 Copenhagen visit: FOI release [FOI/202200317683]', 25 January 2023; <https://www.gov.scot/publications/foi-202200317683/>

<sup>4</sup>K. Cullerton, T. White and A. Lee, 'Doctors rule: an analysis of health ministers' diaries in Australia', *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 16, no. 13, 2019, p. 6.

European election. Constitutional dynamics and intergovernmental relations to which she was central were affected by the 2016 EU referendum and Brexit, UK government refusal of Scottish government requests for an independence referendum and those governments challenging each other in court, and the UK government overriding the Sewel convention of legislative consent. Indeed, the final years of Nicola Sturgeon's premiership and immediate aftermath are best characterised as a tumultuous and eventful time in Scottish and British politics, with campaigning and controversies at regular intervals. Geoghegan contrasts the final months before she resigned with the first few months after:

Sturgeon could claim to be the most effective British politician of her generation. Her Scottish National Party had been in government in Edinburgh for almost a decade and a half. Sturgeon's personal popularity had fallen back from its once dizzying highs, but was still at levels her Westminster counterparts could only dream of. There was talk of a future career in high level international politics.<sup>5</sup>

The aftermath of her resignation stands in contrast, with internal disputes in the party of government and a police investigation of SNP finances making headlines.

Various others have analysed Nicola Sturgeon's political communication and how she addressed different publics during the latter years of her leadership—a skill she is feted for.<sup>6</sup> This article adopts a narrower focus on her meetings and interactions as FM. Some of

these involved photo ops and press coverage; however, many did not.

## Time, priorities and proximity

If First Minister's Questions (FMQs) in the parliamentary debating chamber and Garden Lobby press questions are archetypal examples of the front-and-centre stage of this national leadership role, then ministerial diaries catalogue more of the backstage of the 'day job' of first ministership. Table 1 gives an overview of how Sturgeon's diary entries have been categorised, with some entries assigned two coding categories. One of the findings here is that what dominates FMQs and Scottish news media narratives on Thursday afternoons and across weekend political commentary is not necessarily what dominates the FM's time and interactions for the rest of the week. Some issues and interest groups cut across both as priorities, while some issues and interest groups are conspicuous by their absence in diaries—they are kept away from the FM, with the exposure of proximity delegated to other ministers and civil servants. Bowie compiled a list of the top topics most commonly raised at FMQs in Holyrood in 2022–2023: the NHS and health; ferries and island communities; transgender people and gender recognition policy reforms; education and schools; roads and dualling the A9; and the deposit return scheme.<sup>7</sup> Several of these are notable for their absence or infrequency in Sturgeon's diaries. However, Table 1 does not contain every single coding category in the sample, and some of the issues appearing least frequently will be discussed later.

Content analysis shows how the FM's time was spent on what would reasonably and regularly be expected of a national leader in a modern democracy, for example, media interviews, meeting international leaders and visiting dignitaries, navigating the pandemic, and meetings with trade unions and workforce leaders. The data is also indicative of who had access and proximity and which groups

<sup>5</sup>P. Geoghegan, 'Do all political lives end in failure?', *Political Insight*, vol. 14, no. 2, 2023, p. 3.

<sup>6</sup>For example, M. Higgins, A. Smith and F. McKay, 'Emotional authority in presenting the later Covid-19 strategy: the speeches and statements of Scotland's Nicola Sturgeon', in F. Leon-Sollis and H. O'Donnell, eds., *The Nation in the Time of Pandemic: International Media Narratives of the COVID-19 Crisis*, 2023 [in press]; and A.-A. Creangă, 'Feminist crisis communication and ethics of care: an analysis of crisis communication messages from First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon, during COVID-19 pandemic', in N. Rodríguez-Salcedo, A. Moreno, S. Einwiller and M. Recalde, eds., *(Re)discovering the Human Element in Public Relations and Communication Management in Unpredictable Times*, Bingley, Emerald Publishing, 2023, pp. 47–60.

<sup>7</sup>J. Bowie, '5 topics dominated First Minister's Questions in the past year—do they match your priorities?', *Press and Journal*, 12 July 2023; <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/politics/scottish-politics/5938552/poll-snp-priorities/>

**Table 1: Issues and interest groups appearing in the FM's diary (n = number of diary entries coded by the author as that subject category), April 2021–March 2023**

Category	Diary entries	Category	Diary entries
COP26 and COP27	120	Memorial	18
Health and COVID-19	118	Ukraine	17
Economy and Finance	100	Education	17
Media and Current Affairs	97	Children and Families	16
International Relations	53	Equality	14
Culture	46	Charity	13
Intergovernmental Relations	39	Faith Communities	10
Climate	24	Protocol and Honours	10
Energy	21	Arctic Circle Assembly	9

and policy priorities were a 'signature' focus for Sturgeon. For example, a significant proportion of entries in 'culture' and 'education' relate to books and reading, and the 'culture' category is predominantly book festivals, the Edinburgh festivals and meetings with authors and poets. In the following sections, a few areas of frequent diary entries are discussed, before analysing which issues and groups did not get much time.

### Intergovernmental relations

Sturgeon is prominent for her *savoir-faire* in this regard, positioning her own leadership and government in contrast to that of UK government ministers, adhering to her duties as FM while often advancing Scottish distinctiveness and interests with politically adversarial flair. The tone and nature of intergovernmental relations seems markedly different in interactions with Conservative leaders, in a time of tensions and *ad hoc* appearances in Sturgeon's diaries, compared to those with Labour political leaders, where more collegiate, non-adversarial dynamics prevail.<sup>8</sup>

One diary item in this category stands out from others for its consistency and frequency. Far from the anodyne ritual or obligatory courtesies implied by the caption of 'intergovernmental relations', the regularity of meetings between the Scottish and Welsh FMs, Nicola Sturgeon and Mark Drakeford, attests to a friendship and savvy political cooperation

between two popular national leaders. Joint statements and coordinated strategies arising from such meetings tended to focus on shared priorities (for example, the cost-of-living crisis) and shared political opponents in the context of *other intergovernmental relations*, vis-à-vis the prime minister and UK government. Both FMs tended to unite in their critiques of and calls for the PM to do something, usually foregrounding the interests of Scotland and Wales in the process. Arguably, it has been a fruitful strategy for the SNP and Welsh Labour, promoting values and messages which contrast with and further demarcate themselves from the Tory UK government.

Incidentally, the hapless short-lived premiership of Liz Truss saw a Prime Minister of the United Kingdom and Minister for the Union come into (6 September 2022) and go out of office (25 October 2022) without appearing in the ministerial diaries of her counterparts in devolved nations because she did not meet with the Scottish and Welsh FMs in that official capacity, despite being urged to do so. Perhaps indicative of why they were treated like this, Truss had ungraciously said in August 2022 that 'the best thing to do with Nicola Sturgeon is to ignore her'. The national leadership of one of these three will become peripheral and ignored, and it will not be that of Sturgeon or Drakeford.

### Economy and finance

Of the senior SNP figures most closely associated with the economy and finance over the years, Nicola Sturgeon would not necessarily be the first to come to mind. Others are better

<sup>8</sup>N. McEwan, M. Kenny, J. Sheldon and C. Brown Swan, 'Intergovernmental relations in the UK: time for a radical overhaul?', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 91, no. 3, 2020, pp. 632–640.



recognised for focussing on the economy and being ‘comfortable working the nation’s board rooms’, like Kate Forbes (former Cabinet Secretary for Finance under Sturgeon’s leadership, accountant and an unsuccessful leadership candidate to succeed Sturgeon as FM and SNP leader); Andrew Wilson (former MSP and economist); and of course, Alex Salmond, former MSP, MP, Sturgeon’s predecessor as FM and SNP leader, and economist with a coterie of corporate contacts—albeit now waning in influence since a high-profile criminal court case and setting up the electorally unsuccessful Alba party.<sup>9</sup>

Economy and finance have dominated Sturgeon’s first ministerial diary. Chronopolitically, money matters. After the SNP was re-elected to a third term of Scottish government in 2016, in speaking to the Scottish Leaders’ Forum, Nicola Sturgeon outlined her and her government’s ‘core priorities’, chief among them being ‘to drive economic growth that is strong, sustainable and inclusive.’<sup>10</sup> This is coherent with various statements she had made elsewhere. Upon becoming FM, she told the *Financial Times*

I want them [businesses] to know that they have got nothing to fear from me. I am a social democrat, I believe in pursuing greater equality and tackling social justice, but ... you can’t do that unless you have got a strong economy, unless you have got a vibrant business base earning the wealth that makes that possible.<sup>11</sup>

Analysis of qualitative information in Sturgeon’s diary entries in the ‘economy and finance’ category and some related lobbying register entries show three clear patterns. First, there are a lot of meetings with bankers, business and financial experts. Second, there are a lot of meetings within this category (but also inherent within other categories) on tackling

the cost-of-living crisis and economic inequalities, reflecting concerns about household budgets and poverty. Third, in this category, there are regular meetings with trade unionists, for example, the most frequently named is the Chief Executive of the Royal College of Nursing, discussing pay negotiations, industrial relations and the NHS.

On becoming successor as FM in 2023, one of Humza Yousaf’s most prominent pledges was a ‘reset’ in the relationship with business and a change in approach to business and the economy. A perception of Sturgeon and messages briefed out by the business lobby was that ‘businesses felt that they were at the end of the queue outside the First Minister’s door, while her attention was focused on public services and inequalities. She would be closely involved in her health secretary’s portfolio, but leave the economy to others’.<sup>12</sup> Analysis of first ministerial diaries and corresponding lobbying register entries confirm close involvement in the health portfolio, but otherwise contradicts and challenges this view: Sturgeon spent plenty of time interacting with business and focussing on the economy. A salient point from her diaries is that it was often *big* business and industry bodies, at a time when small and medium enterprises (SMEs) accounted for 99.4 per cent of all private sector businesses, providing 1.2 million jobs, in Scotland in 2022.<sup>13</sup> A potential driver of these perceptions in business circles, other than self-interest, is that Sturgeon foregrounded environmental issues and health issues to promote certain policies (for example, deposit return scheme recycling; alcohol advertising limits) that were unpopular with businesses in those sectors and which, ultimately, were postponed or downplayed by her successor as part of his ‘reset’. Such issues should not be overly individualised. The Green Party in Scottish government as well as the Conservative UK government and

<sup>9</sup>D. Fraser, ‘The Scottish economy, the SNP and the absence of economic nationalism’, in G. Hassan and S. Barrow, eds., *A Nation Changed? The SNP and Scotland Ten Years On*, Edinburgh, Luath Press, 2020, p. 76.

<sup>10</sup>N. Sturgeon, *Scottish Leaders’ Forum Speech*, 8 June 2016; <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-leaders-forum-first-ministers-speech/>

<sup>11</sup>N. Sturgeon, quoted in M. Dickie, ‘Nicola Sturgeon: “Business has nothing to fear”’, *Financial Times*, 30 November 2014; <https://www.ft.com/content/45fab178-78a5-11e4-b518-00144feabdcd>

<sup>12</sup>D. Fraser, ‘Humza Yousaf’s business reboot’, BBC Scotland, 19 April 2023; <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-business-65320810>

<sup>13</sup>Scottish Government, *Businesses in Scotland: 2022*; <https://www.gov.scot/publications/businesses-in-scotland-2022/pages/business-size/#:~:text=As%20at%20March%202022%2C%20there%20were%20358%2C575%20Small%20and%20Medium,turn-over%20as%20at%20March%202022>

Internal Market Act played significant roles in the impasse with the Scottish deposit return scheme.

Nicola Sturgeon's leadership on finance and the economy can be framed in different ways. One framing is that of 'pragmatism' and 'a leadership committed to moderation': having to lead the economy you've got in Scotland (a capitalist economy) while seeking to lead towards the kind of economy that Sturgeon and the SNP want (a wellbeing economy).<sup>14</sup> Her critics might choose another framing, seeking to problematise her approach to economic leadership as more paradoxical: leading in a way that emphasises different realities and issues to different audiences, eloquently communicating a progressive vision, but not challenging the status quo or substantively changing the circumstances which give rise to present realities or future visions. Refutation of such a critique involves contextualisation and discussing constitutional politics for which there is insufficient space here.

## Energy, climate and the environment

During her time as FM, a substantial amount of time was devoted to meetings on energy, climate and the environment. Indeed, the largest of categories in this sample is 'COP26 and COP27', with 120 diary entries occurring intensively in a few specific months around when these global climate summits were held. When the COP events category is combined with the coding categories of 'climate' and 'energy', the FM spent approximately 24 per cent of the total sample of two years of meetings and engagements focussing on this area. An interesting variety of people and interest groups turn up in these interactions: from young climate activist Greta Thunberg and the Stop Climate Chaos Scotland coalition, to UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, and leaders of nations in the Global South, to corporations like BP and Boeing, through to calls with Australian billionaire, Andrew Forrest, a mining magnate turned climate investor.

<sup>14</sup>R. Johns, and J. Mitchell, *Takeover: Explaining the Extraordinary Rise of the SNP*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016, p. 247.

Why would the world stage of tackling climate change and environmental issues matter so much to Sturgeon? There are a few plausible reasons. Sturgeon is good at it—it plays to her strengths and international popularity, and it encompasses important issues on which she communicates with conviction. For COP26, the international spotlight was on Glasgow and Scotland. Sturgeon's work ethic meant that adding eighty-three meetings and high-level connections to her other commitments in a calendar month was a strategic choice which permeated into mostly favourable press coverage. The following year, Sturgeon and the Scottish government hosted their own conference on loss and damage, before going to COP27 and announcing £5 million loss and damage funding to mitigate climate impacts in developing nations—a commitment celebrated as world-leading. As per the well-recognised Scottish implementation gap, a year later it emerged that not one of those £5 million had yet been spent.<sup>15</sup>

One of the striking features of Nicola Sturgeon's diaries is the time spent on matters that are, under the terms of the Scotland Act, partly or mostly reserved to Westminster. Energy is one of these areas. Sturgeon interacted with various renewable energy companies, oil and gas companies, discussed how banks might support net zero and energy efficiency in homes, and trade unionists lobbied her on green jobs and a 'Just Transition'. Analysis of the lobbying register by journalists at *The Ferret* also shows energy companies were among the most frequent lobbyists of Scottish ministers and advisers.<sup>16</sup> Constitutional dynamics (Brexit, devolution, and the hope of advancing an independence prospectus) and geopolitical, environmental and socioeconomic dynamics (the energy crisis, cost-of-living crisis, climate crisis, war in Ukraine, and Just Transition-related political sensitivities in north east Scotland) are relevant to why energy appears regularly in the FM's

<sup>15</sup>D. Bol, 'SNP has failed to spend any of world-leading £5m loss and damage funds', *The Herald*, 11 August 2023; <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/23715293.snp-failed-spend-world-leading-5m-loss-damage-funds/>

<sup>16</sup>K. Goodwin, "'Big energy' dominates lobbying of Scottish government amid climate crisis', *The Ferret*, 12 July 2021; <https://theferret.scot/concerns-over-influence-of-energy-lobby/>

diary. Patterns observed in ministerial diaries fit with an astute explanation of multi-level energy policy put forward by Cairney and colleagues, which shows how legal powers are separated between different governments 'on paper', but there are complex overlapping responsibilities, blurry boundaries and other influences in practice.<sup>17</sup>

### Which issues and groups *don't* get much time?

Some of Sturgeon's stated priorities and Scotland's most prominent public policy problems on which she was pressed in FMQs were not frequent categories in her diary, as illustrated in Table 2. In some areas, this seems to reveal a temporal contrast in priorities between an SNP leader and certain opposition parties. Rural affairs is the least frequent coding category, with one diary entry and making up 0.1 per cent of the total sample. By contrast, rural affairs often feature in the political communication and public events attendance of the Scottish Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, especially as the constituencies and regions where their politicians are elected are often outwith central belt cities. Had Kate Forbes succeeded as Sturgeon's successor, rural affairs would now feature more frequently in ministerial diaries and SNP contributions in the public sphere—though with a track record of only one meeting in two years, that would not be difficult to improve upon.

One of the most politically potent and deeply felt issues on this list is drug policy and drug deaths. Only three diary entries (0.4 per cent of total) appear to fall within this category. Over a similar period, official statistics report that 1,330 people (2021) and then 1,051 people (2022) died of a drug-related death in Scotland. Beyond the tragic losses, many more lives were affected by drug-related harms. In April 2021, the first calendar month in this sample and weeks before the Scottish Parliament election, Sturgeon was pressed on this issue, and her response was personal: 'I think

we took our eye off the ball on drug deaths ... I take the view that when politicians get things wrong, and we all get things wrong—it's really important to face up to that. That's what I've done on drug deaths.'<sup>18</sup>

Expected lines of argument in defence of Sturgeon on this serious issue include: (a) that aspects of drugs policy are reserved to Westminster and the UK Home Office; (b) that she could not single-handedly 'be all things to all people' and fit everything in her diary and therefore must delegate; and (c) that there is a Minister for Drugs Policy who answered directly to her and whose ministerial diary attested to their proximity to key issues and interest groups. This is correct, on all three counts. It still falls short of what some Scots might expect in response to a national emergency, given just how much of Sturgeon's time was devoted to other emergencies in the same period, such as the Covid pandemic, climate emergency, energy crisis and cost-of-living crisis.

Stigma and social exclusion may have some bearing on who doesn't get time and access. Similar to the alcohol and drugs field and the housing and homelessness field, another area which was largely absent was criminal justice and community safety. Several of the diary entries categorised as 'justice' were for the FM to hand out bravery awards to members of the public and emergency services workers. However, policing, forensics, courts, prosecution, victim support, legal aid and lawyers, prisons, parole, community justice (Scottish equivalent of probation and justice third sector), and community safety are less frequent or missing. On the contrary, they were not infrequent or missing from Scottish parliamentary scrutiny and debate, nor from the legislative agenda and news media across the same period.

Finally, there is a notable lack of interaction and close cooperation between leaders of national and local government, as apparent in these diaries and as observed by others.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>18</sup>A. Grant, 'Nicola Sturgeon: we took our eye off the ball on drug deaths', *The Herald*, 14 April 2021; <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/19231212-nicola-sturgeon-took-eye-off-ball-drug-deaths/>

<sup>19</sup>J. Mitchell, 'We have devolution from Westminster, but not from Holyrood: Scotland as a centralised state', *Scottish Left Review*, 2022; <https://www.scottishleftreview.scot/scotland-as-a-centralised-state/>

<sup>17</sup>P. Cairney, A. McHarg, N. McEwan and K. Turner, 'How to conceptualise energy law and policy for an interdisciplinary audience: the case of post-Brexit UK', *Energy Policy*, vol. 129, 2019, pp. 459–466.

**Table 2: Issues and interest groups less frequently appearing in the FM's diary (n = number of diary entries coded by the author as that category), April 2021–March 2023**

Category	Diary entries	Examples of meetings, issues, and interest groups
Rural Affairs	1	Attending exhibition for a QMS industry breakfast briefing.
Housing and Homelessness	2	Visit to Shelter Scotland Hub in Edinburgh. Visit to NG Homes in Glasgow to announce funding for zero emission heating networks.
Drugs	3	Visit to open Harper House drug rehab centre in Saltcoats. Visit to Scottish Fire and Rescue Service Bathgate fire station to discuss fire crews carrying naloxone (to prevent overdose). Visit to Bluevale Recovery Hub in Glasgow with Douglas Ross MSP MP.
Immigration	3	Meetings on immigration with an MP and police. Meeting with EU nationals about Brexit and applying to live in Scotland/UK. (Note: Ukraine is a separate category).
Sport	5	Scotland games at Hampden Park. The Open at St. Andrews. Commonwealth Games 2022 Reception at Stirling Castle.
Local Government	6	Meetings with COSLA President, representatives. Attending COSLA Conference. Call with Glasgow City Council leader.
Transport	6	Opening of the Highland Spring Rail Freight. Announcement of public ownership of ScotRail. Call with UK Secretary of State for Transport. Opening of Royal Mail electric delivery office.
Justice	8	Visit to University of Glasgow to announce the Emma Rich Law Clinic. Speech for 30 <sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Zero Tolerance campaign to end violence against women. Meeting to discuss the Barnahus/Bairn's Hoose for children and young people.

Sturgeon's successor, Humza Yousaf, promised a 'reset' in the relationship with local government, with the Verity House agreement in 2023, implicitly acknowledging disconnection and disempowerment felt in local government circles at a time of pressured resources and backlogs to access public services.

### Key insights from first ministerial diaries

A few findings and lines of argument are summarised here. Women and children appear as 'signature' priorities spanning across different areas of the FM's activities. This includes, but extends well beyond diary entries which are marked as 'gender equality' or 'children and families'. In this regard, Nicola Sturgeon's inclusive feminist identity and rhetoric are imbued in her calendrics. The weight and credence given to ministerial diaries should not be overstated—to offer generalised remarks on notions of *effectiveness*, 'success' or performance in achieving better outcomes for women and children based solely on time commitments would be unwise. Another

signature priority across categories is that of books and reading. One of the best opportunities for the Scottish public to see and possibly interact with Sturgeon as FM was at book festivals and the Edinburgh festivals.

Ministerial diaries offer behind-the-scenes insights into the being and doing of first ministerialship, *and*, to an extent, the doing of devolution and complexities of constitutional arrangements. As First Minister of Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon spent a proportion of her time focusing on matters that are partly or wholly reserved to Westminster. By contrast, she did not spend much of her time in meetings and engagements on some major political and public policy issues in Scotland which *are* (partly or wholly) within the powers of devolution. Instead, these were handled by other Scottish ministers. From a temporal perspective, interest groups and sectors like drugs policy, housing, transport, criminal justice, science, tourism and local government, had limited direct access and proximity to the FM.

An audience with a national leader can be indicative of priorities and potential for influence—as can its absence. It brings to mind Savigny's critical analysis of the intensely political nature of dominant interests and



who gets to have ‘voice’, who has the symbolic resources to be heard and have an audience, observing how ‘articulation of interests is thus reliant on others’ acknowledgement, recognition and legitimation of those interests.’<sup>20</sup> In this context, diary management and choreography of meetings (by the FM, by special advisers, private office and others) can be understood as multi-faceted: as functions of stateswomanship and national leadership and, in part, as forms of politically protective gatekeeping and risk management. In other words, keeping ‘wicked problems’ and difficult stories away from the leader—if it is their government that is responsible for them.

A temporal lens raises intriguing questions and insights about what Sturgeon as an SNP FM framed as her priorities. Data from these diaries need to be understood in their wider social-political context. Overall, this article demonstrates the utility in paying attention to how and with whom government ministers spend their time, cross-referenced with resources like the lobbying register, and to consider who and which issues are missing or lesser heard and why.

*Hannah Graham* is a criminologist and academic at the University of Stirling.

<sup>20</sup>H. Savigny, *Political Communication: A Critical Introduction*, London, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2017, p. 49.