

**From East Timor to East Kilbride: talking independence, fair trade and freedom  
with Linda Fabiani, SNP MSP for East Kilbride  
SCPO Interview, January 2012**

"I remember a huge stooshie at home when I was fairly young because there was talk of emigrating to Australia... and I remember a big fight in the house because my father was refusing to even consider it because of the racist immigration policies that Australia had at that time."

Growing up in the west of Scotland in a family of natural Labour supporters, with roots on her paternal grandmother's side in the Communist Party, a young Linda Fabiani developed an awareness of inequality and injustice, both at home and abroad, from a very early age. Some of Linda's early political memories involve issues of race and civil rights with notable influences including Martin Luther King, (she was "totally blown away by him - I thought he was absolutely amazing") and Nelson Mandela; but at home she grew up learning from her father's strong sense of fairness and what was right and wrong in the world. "So it was very issue-based rather than party political based, and I think from that frustration, I grew up interested in things like anti-apartheid, getting rid of nuclear weapons, and I came to the conclusion that the only way I felt that Scotland could really deal with these things was as an independent nation, as it wasn't really going to happen as part of the United Kingdom." Despite quickly coming to this decision, the decision to join the SNP was not a natural progression for Linda, who only eventually became involved in the SNP towards the late 1980s, joining in 1990: "when Mr Salmond became leader I liked what he and his supporters had as a vision for the future so that was when I joined."

It is clear that Linda has a passion for justice, fairness and sees the best way of achieving this in Scottish independence. She currently convenes the Scotland Bill Committee, which has been considering the UK Government's recommendations for reconfiguring the allocation of powers between the UK and Scottish Parliaments in the Scotland Bill, currently being considered by the House of Lords. However, "all of a sudden we now have this issue of David Cameron coming out about the [independence] referendum and all the talk, and here's this Scotland Bill, and it's almost as if it doesn't exist. I haven't had a response yet as Convener from the UK Government to the report that we sent them in December. ... I would suggest that a lot of people in politics at the moment in the opposition parties are all over the place on it. I think I'll be writing very soon and saying 'Scuse me! We've still got this report that we sent to you - you promised us respect and that you'd respond to it!' I mean, is it just to be ditched? What's going on?" Sure enough, shortly after this interview was conducted, Linda did write to Secretary of State for Scotland, Michael Moore, who replied to say that the UK Government was still considering the Committee's report. However, Linda is frustrated that the process that the Committee had been following has been "rather overtaken by events": "there's all this talk about the two-question referendum or single question referendum, and I thought, if you just agreed to everything that was in our report from the Scotland Bill Committee and agreed the principle of that level of powers for the Parliament as we had in our report, it would then just be a yes-no question, because the issue of devo-plus and devo max would be out the way."

She sees parallels with the political discussions about devolution in the 1970s, where "Sir Alec Douglas-Home was saying vote no, vote no, vote no and then we'll make sure that you get more powers and it'll be fine... you'll get better by voting no, and then look what happened in '79, the ballot was rigged and here we are 30 years later, and we've still got people saying to us vote no, vote no, and you'll get better. You'd think we are daft - once is enough guys!"

However, Linda's experience of independence referenda is not confined only questions about the place of Scotland within the UK. One of her most interesting early experiences as an MSP ("the naivety of first being elected!") saw her being a UN Observer at the East Timor independence referendum. She fell into the opportunity by chance after appearing on a radio show as the only Scottish politician amongst other UK representatives discussing the UK's

intervention in Kosovo. "I was getting slammed by the others because Alex Salmond had come out with some grave concerns. ... I was getting quite angry, and I said that what I couldn't stand was the self-righteousness and hypocrisy that was being spouted about this; after all, people were being massacred in East Timor with weapons that had been purchased from the UK and its allies." Her comments were noticed by the East Timor support group which was based at that time in Glasgow University, and the opportunity to attend as a UN Observer arose from a meeting with that group.

"It was a scary experience as well, not for me personally, I never felt at risk - if anything was going to happen to any of the foreigners it was going to be random absolutely not deliberate - but oh my, to see it first-hand and to feel the terror on behalf of others about what could happen was quite an experience that's never left me. When the foreigners left, there were massacres because the referendum had been won by the people. I think my last memory of that trip was the absolute guilt of being able to get on a plane and leave, and there were people trying to get into the UN compound, mums throwing their children over the barbed wire to try and get them into the compound to be safe- it was just horrendous. That was my first experience of political terror I suppose." But Linda has returned on several occasions, and she is positive about the way in which the political situation is developing: "things are moving on it that country; they're making their own decisions and at least they're free."

Linda has also built more personal links with a family she met when she first went out, and whom her and her partner, Duncan, have now become very close to. Although she has no children of her own, "we've made very strong links with a family in Timor that we now consider our own, and that's maintained - we've been back, my partner and I, and they're part of the family now. The lads come over and stay with us and get their education. I just consider them my sons. I've got two lads as far as I'm concerned. They're great."

Winning the East Kilbride seat for the SNP in May was a great achievement for Linda, who had previously been elected to the Parliament as a list MSP, but in the 2011 election she unseated Labour's Andy Kerr, the incumbent MSP for East Kilbride since the first election to the Scottish Parliament in 1999. Although she is therefore no newcomer, she is by no means jaded. She considers the "greatest achievement of the re-establishment of the Parliament is just having the forum for people to have their voices heard." She speaks with warmth and genuine enthusiasm about going into schools in her constituency, where "I just feel joy that the people that I'm talking to really have no memory, especially the wee ones, of not having the Parliament here, it's so normal to them. They turn up at the Parliament or they meet MSPs or they speak to people that work in the Parliament, and I like the confidence that that brings."

Very keen on the civic engagement that the Parliament brings, Linda very much respects the rights of faith groups to bring their contribution to the table; that is an "absolute right". However, she is a firm believer in the separation of church and state, and admits to sometimes feeling "a wee bit frustrated that sometimes I feel like some churches put across a view that they speak for everyone who adheres to their faith and that's quite clearly not the case, so I think that can be a frustration, but it's not a huge issue. But, you know, if people wish their church to put across what they deem to be a collective view, they have that right, as long as no-one has been potentially hurt by that or nor is it offensive."

One issue on which Linda and the churches would find common ground is the issue of fair trade. This is something she is personally very passionate about, being very involved in the Strathaven Fair Trade group which saw the town become the first in Scotland to achieve Fair Trade Town status. She is also positive about the steps that the Scottish Parliament has taken, particularly in consumables, in terms of providing fair trade produce around the Parliament. However, she is pragmatic about the challenges of achieving Fair Trade status and what it actually means: "I believe that a lot can be said about fair trade and we can label things and actually sometimes we have to look behind that, and we have to look behind the rhetoric... I am not convinced that

once fair trade status is achieved that it is always properly maintained. I'm not beginning to know all the answers here, but I'm just flagging up some issues. I have concerns about the drive for fair trade nation status. I'm all for it as a principle, of course I am, and I think it would be wonderful, but I think there's an awful lot that is still not quite fair. I think in terms of procurement, yes it's wonderful the way it has expanded in terms of consumables and I would never knock that: I think it's great. But when you look at the bigger picture, when you look at things like the NHS procurement of some of the medical equipment, basic things like cotton, for sheets, when you look at some of the government procurement issues, fair trade is not there. ... When I look at Wales having achieved it so quickly, I don't think it's something we should necessarily try and emulate. ... I don't want to suddenly wake up one morning and be told that Scotland has achieved Fair Trade Nation status if some of these bigger issues haven't been tackled... So yes, I'm a huge supporter, but let's be serious about it."

Election years, Linda points out, are even more hectic than the average year, and whilst Linda is extremely appreciative of the opportunities she has as an MSP to enjoy cultural and social events, the downside is that she finds it hard to fit in time to see her nearest and dearest. She has set herself a New Year's Resolution to try and rectify this, though; being strict about allocating time in her diary during Parliamentary recess to do things with family and friends who she doesn't have the chance to see ordinarily. Day to day, however, her main relaxation is reading, and she particularly loves her Kindle. Having a choice of books at her fingertips, and with no distractions from incoming emails is perfect for Linda.

Reflecting on the best piece of advice that she has received, Linda refers to a character from Charles Kingsley's "The Waterbabies", which has stuck in her memory ever since she read it at a very young age; Mrs Do As You Would Be Done By. Our readers may recognise this as the Golden Rule, treating others as you would wish to be treated. For Linda, although she says it is "a bit of a cliché", it has something which has remained etched on her memory, as "I think you get back what you give out largely."

