

"Church, football and politics" **Interview with Jim Murphy MP, Secretary of State for Scotland**

The experience of growing up poor in Glasgow and white in South Africa drove Jim Murphy to join the Labour Party at the time of the General Election in 1987. "My family emigrated to South Africa when I was 12 and I'd gone from relative poverty in Glasgow to absolute racism in South Africa," he explains. Every morning he queued for his white-only bus to go to his white-only school and returned home each night to the block of flats that was home to his family and but one house away from Robin Island where Nelson Mandela was imprisoned. When he was a teenager all white boys had to serve two years in the South African army and though keen to stress that he isn't a pacifist he didn't want to "fight in a racist army". So he returned to Scotland and at that time "Mrs Thatcher had one view of apartheid and the Labour Party had a different view." In a world of moral absolutes, there was no question in his mind: to side with the party that sides with apartheid, or to side with the party that wants to bring down apartheid? Summing up his decision, he says, "Utter idealism and the Labour Party were much closer to my sense of right and wrong than any other political party was or is."

It wasn't until recently however that he discovered he had been interested in politics as a boy. About two years ago his mother gave him his old school books and his daily news book gave him a fascinating insight into his concerns and interests as a child. "Every Monday there was only ever three things in my news book - one, what priest said that Sunday in Mass, second, how Celtic did, and the third was, and my family can't explain this but, what was happening in politics. Church, football and politics."

We jump to 1997 when he stood as a candidate in East Renfrewshire on the shared understanding with his wife (girlfriend at the time) that he would give it a go but that he wouldn't win - that was the deal. The constituency had been under the Conservatives since the 1920s so they decided, "We'll have an election campaign for a month and then we'll get back to making plans for our life, get married and have a family. There was no chance I would win - no chance." What motivated him was the idea that the world was unfair and that you could "make a wee bit of a difference"; that "well if you want the world to be changed you shouldn't just sit in your living room and just shout at the telly, you should do something about it". All politicians want to change the world, he goes on to say, but some "want to change it in a way that I would find really pretty unhealthy, the Conservatives want to do it in a selfish kind of me first type of way and I just think the Labour Party believe in something different and it always will do. At our core we believe in a fairer, better world. People shouldn't live longer just because of where they were born or have better chances because of the colour of their skin."

12 years on and 3 election victories later and he has built a solid base of support in his constituency by "being visible, being active" and "trying his best for folk". "I'll do 15 surgeries a month, I'm knocking on doors every week, I try and update my website by myself every day, so far it seems to have worked ok. I do my video blog every Friday." This may not sound out of the ordinary but this is an example of one of the most accessible local MPs and it is a particular challenge for him when his role as Secretary of State means that the two places he's meant to be the most are London and Edinburgh yet his constituents are just outside Glasgow. And so is his wife and family and he is clearly concerned that his family are the ones that lose out in this balancing act saying, "I do my best but it's not always good enough."

As Secretary of State for Scotland his priority is simple, "To get out of this recession without the poorest being left behind." The Labour Party have an awful lot of good things over the last decade he argues, things that "understandably are now taken for granted" like the National Minimum Wage, Tax Credits, Pension Credits, Paternity leave..."We didn't have any of that when we came to power - that's all the creation of the last decade of a Labour Government." The danger is though

that in previous recessions "the poor were the first in to the recession and the last out." It must be different this time but "that's easy to say as a politician but it's much harder to do."

In a previous role he was Minister for State for Employment and Welfare Reform. "The most dangerous thing to do in Scotland is unemployment - bad for your mental health, bad for your diet, bad for your self-belief, bad for your kids. The Labour Party was founded on the right to work and full employment and that's what I believe in." The new Welfare Reform Act is going to make things better he thinks, but he is concerned that it doesn't tip the balance one way or the other. "I think what the welfare reform plans do now is put an awful lot more focus on mental health illness, learning disability and childcare needs and that's really important so I think that is going in the right direction. What is really crucial is that those folk aren't compelled to take a job - because at a time of recession the jobs aren't there...You can never force someone with a mental health illness to go to work but you can say to folk, how can we help you? You can make it compulsory that folk go on some sort of course, even if it is one hour a week, volunteering, going on a computer course, going on a part-time evening course. Just to try and get people a bit more self confidence and self belief."

Another priority just now is combating the BNP and finding new ways to respond to the reality that they got 30,000 votes at the European elections. "We've got to a different stage with them [the BNP]- it makes me feel ill the idea that they are on telly, it turns my stomach but it is unavoidable now because we've got to the stage now where ignoring them isn't an option, it's a luxury we don't have anymore." Recently he has changed his mind on the best way to deal with the fascist party: "it's time to bring them out and into the light and try and argue logic and hope against their hatred. When I was the president of NUS I used to run campaigns, ban the BNP, no platform, you can't have them on telly, you can't have them in universities. I don't want them in any of these places but they are there now and you can't deny the reality that 30,000 people in this country voted for a fascist party." The biggest problem, he argues, is complacency and gives the example of the St. Andrews Day March last year that was only attended by a few hundred people. It's vital this year to have a good turnout at the same event on the 29th November and he urges faith leaders to join together in their constituencies before the election to show a united front against the BNP.

This is but one example of how he believes churches and other faith communities can and do have a big role to play in society: a role he would like to see grow. "I just kind of think that Government can't do everything by itself and that churches, and mosques and synagogues have a relationship with their followers that Government can never match. There is a relationship of trust between members of faith organisations that we don't do enough to harness. So I would like to see faith groups doing an awful lot more in providing Government services. Now not in a way that jeopardises the independence of faith organisations because that is paramount - churches in particular exist in some of the poorest communities - places where Government doesn't have a presence." Citing the example of the "spectacular things" President Obama is doing on the relationship between faith organisations and Government he goes on, "in a time of recession in particular we should be harnessing the good will of good people of faith to take their natural inclination to help people but do it with some Government support - I'd like to see more of that happen."

Personally he says, "I've got a faith in God, I believe in the importance of church. I believe in the goodness of faith, I believe in the inspiration of faith. If it wasn't for church and faith I worry about who else would give a societal conscience. For me faith is about how you live your life - I think if you preach at people you end up feeling like a hypocrite."

