

**"The belief that if you vote for a certain person or party
it will actually change something"**
Interview with Alex Fergusson, Conservative MSP for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale
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Alex Fergusson is instinctively a Conservative - "I think I'm just a dyed-in-the-wool Tory", he laughs. There might be aspects of the party he'd like to change, but he believes in fighting from the inside. As a farmer, his only previous foray into politics had been as a community councillor. Unusually for a Conservative, he had a longstanding interest in devolution, and - undeterred by his lack of political experience - stood as a candidate, out of a conviction that rural interests should be represented. "The opportunity arose and I dipped my toe in the water of Scottish politics, and much to my surprise I ended up as a Member of the Scottish Parliament".

His belief that the Scottish Parliament "would need all the rural voices it could get" has, he feels, been borne out by experience. The tendency to think that the "real social ills of our time" - homelessness, drug addiction, anti-social behaviour, poverty - are only urban issues, is a myth Fergusson is keen to correct. "There's a heck of a lot of injustice out there" he says, revealing that one of the hardest parts of the job is writing replies to constituents - "often the most deserving of justice (whether legal or moral)" - and not being able to access that justice for them, having come up against a brick wall. Frustration, he says, sums up his experience as a parliamentarian. Used to running his own business, where he could change things quickly, it has been a culture shock for Fergusson to get used to dealing with the frustratingly slow political and bureaucratic processes: "yet when you finally get through it all and you can get something done for an individual constituent, the reward is there and that makes the frustration worthwhile". He's convinced most politicians are similarly motivated to make things better.

Fergusson admits he finds the demands of political life incredibly hard to get away from ... "It's something that lives with you all the time and it gets into your system and just stays there". Hobbies such as curling and playing guitar have had to take very much a backseat, though he still finds time to mow the lawn or chop logs which he finds "quite therapeutic"; Sunday afternoons are sacrosanct for family. Now the MSP for Galloway and Upper Nithsdale, he moved from being a list MSP for the South of Scotland after winning the constituency seat. It's difficult to walk down the street without being recognised and approached by constituents, "at least it should be if you're doing your job", he adds; "I still have friends and family from my previous life ... I don't want to sound as if I've sacrificed my life for politics - I haven't."

As someone with no political background, who confesses he was always a little in awe of politicians, he was surprised to find himself getting on so well with politicians from other parties with whose views he has little in common. He's not naming any names of current MSPs but he does talk about his friendship with the former rebel Labour MSP John McAllion, forged when McAllion was convener of cross party group on ME and Fergusson vice convener - an unlikely alliance, despite being "completely opposite politically" they "got on like a house on fire".

A son of the manse, he describes his father as an interesting mixture - a soldier for over 20 years, a farmer for 10, and then a minister for the latter 20 years of his life - "which is what he should have been doing because he was extraordinarily good at it", says Fergusson, reflecting nonetheless that the life experience probably made him a better minister. Growing up in a household based on strong faith, it's always been an integral part of his life. "I don't - very much to my regret - have quite the same depth of faith that my father had. I have many questions as yet unanswered but I cannot contemplate life without it being centred round faith". He hopes his faith informs his daily work but feels that's really for others to judge.

Fergusson moved the original motion in parliament that led to the creation of Time for Reflection. "It struck me very early on that the week's business ... lacked something - a dignity to get the proceedings underway at the beginning of every week", he explains. As well as giving dignity to the proceedings, he hoped it would "remind members that there are other powers at work - it's quite easy to get quite bigheaded in this job, you're in the public eye, in the newspapers, and it's easy to get a bit carried away. Having that brief moment at the beginning of every week is just a wee reminder that you're not the only one in charge".

Although his initial idea was for Christian prayers, he's pleased with the "exciting" way it has developed. "What came out of that was absolutely the right answer because here we are in a new Scottish Parliament, in a new political Scotland, and what a splendid way to introduce an all-embracing Time for Reflection." Time for Reflection has been "ultimately a great success", he believes, noting that people often come into the chamber specifically for that slot and leave afterwards. "I have no regrets whatever about it", he declares, "and I'll probably never do anything quite as meaningful again".

"One of my father's sayings was that we should never preach politics from the pulpit and I think I still agree with that", he says, adding, nevertheless, that he would "very much regret it if they took a backward step in terms of pushing their views forward and letting us MSPs know exactly what the churches think". Recognising that in Scotland the Churches have always had a substantial political role, he maintains that declining numbers of adherents don't mean the churches are no longer influential. Applauding the record of engagement so far - if not endorsing all the views - he sees the Churches as having "grasped the whole new process very quickly and very well". Although he's certain the Churches don't need his encouragement, he would urge them to "carry on in exactly that vein".

Fergusson's father was a very strong influence on him, and he maintains that without his wife he wouldn't have gone into politics in the first place. As someone for whom politics is a fairly recent pursuit, there are no political figures he could identify as having shaped his outlook, but he has a great admiration for the black American civil rights leader and Baptist minister, Martin Luther King - "the most inspirational character in political history". "I wouldn't say he influenced me", he explains, "but he didn't half inspire me. The 'I have a dream' speech and his vision at a time when his race were almost worse than second-class citizens - to have the courage and the guts to do what he did ... I admire anybody who has that kind of guts - Emmeline Pankhurst must have had possibly even greater courage - incredibly courageous people who fight hard for what they believe in. It's very hard not to be inspired by those types of people".

A value he holds dear is a sense of personal responsibility, which he feels has been eroded in society, because people expect the state to provide more and more. He's clear, however, that responsibility has to be tempered with an "absolute understanding that not everybody is equipped to get through life without help - any civilized society needs to be aware of that".

Given the build up to the creation of the Scottish Parliament, Fergusson finds the 49% turnout at the Parliament's 2nd election "really worrying", particularly the even lower rates of voting among younger age groups: "once you start getting politicians elected on 40% we've got a serious problem". He's clear that it is politicians who have led to such high numbers of people staying away from the polls and therefore up to them to reverse the trend. He doesn't have a simple solution - "if it was an easy answer it would have been done already". Part of the reason, he concludes, is the lessening of differences between policy positions of the main political parties in recent years. While some parties (e.g. the Greens and SSP) appeal more to young people, the experience of the SNP since their stunning breakthroughs of the 1960s and 1970s suggests that people tend not to stay loyal to parties which appealed in their youth. People are interested in political issues, Fergusson is convinced, but he suggests that the accountability of elected representatives has diminished to the extent that "people can no longer tie up the person with the issue". Fergusson doesn't see compulsory voting as a solution: "we should be able to get 60%, 80% of the people voting through choice", he insists. What is needed, he feels, is something to "trigger back the belief that if you vote for a certain person or party it will actually change something".

