

Faith and a Hairy Shirt

INTERVIEW WITH ANNABEL GOLDIE, Conservative List MSP for the West of Scotland (Published May 2005)

Annabel Goldie: MSP for the West of Scotland, Deputy Leader of the Scottish Conservative Party, convener of the Justice 2 Committee, Kirk elder and a member of the Salvation Army West Scotland Advisory Board. A heavy load but one she seems to relish. She says that she gets a great deal of pleasure out of her role as deputy leader, helped enormously by the fact that "David McLetchie and I are good pals, we get on well together". As you might expect from a solicitor she also enjoys engaging in party political debate and found campaigning for her party in the run up to the General Election "exhilarating": there was "a certain sense of liberation" in campaigning for other people, rather than for your own livelihood. She feels that there is a very cordial relationship between the Scottish Conservative Party and their UK level counterparts, with a "natural warmth and rapport" visible when they all get together.

Acknowledging that the Conservatives were against devolution (though adding that their opposition to it meant that a vital and informed debate took place), she says that the party were always prepared to accept the will of Scotland and once that happened they drew a line in the sand and put their efforts into "contributing to the Parliament being a sensible place of governance". She personally decided to stand for the Scottish Parliament because "it was very clear to me that there was going to be a lopsided representation of view in this Parliament if people of my political standpoint were not prepared to come forward to seek election".

She has never regretted giving up her position as a full-time lawyer because she believes that her presence with her colleagues is valuable as they are prepared to challenge and question the dominating "political preponderance" in the Parliament. She has also recovered from the shock of the high level of visibility that comes with being an MSP. MSPs are "a very local type of elected politician", which means that they are seen on trains and standing at stations and running through streets to get to those stations. She thinks that this is healthy (being amongst the people you represent, not just the running), and, while it can sometimes be quite abrasive to be confronted with someone's views, Annabel says that it forces her to think about why it is she holds her opinions. Because of this she is convinced about the importance of political principle, which she feels allows the Conservatives to have a consistency of approach to the issues that they face, unlike other parties which "seem to act in a much more reactive fashion" to the current issue of the day.

Sceptical about the value of legislation, she doesn't believe that passing an Act of the Scottish Parliament will necessarily create a solution; instead, it generally just regulates certain unacceptable situations. She thinks legislation should only be used as a last resort, because whether it is brought in to stop something from happening, or to create a platform from which things can then happen, "it is all based on the foundation that something is failing in society". She cites the example of lack of discipline in schools and the fact that a member of staff is assaulted every twelve minutes in a school. A solution would be to find out what is driving the behaviour of disruptive pupils; to find out if it is their family background, or the abuse of drugs and alcohol, or the negative influence of certain cultural idols. Once the problems have been identified, her approach would then be to get into the school and find out what needs to be done to help teachers reaffirm their authority: "I doubt that would need legislation".

Drug abuse in Scotland deeply troubles Annabel. If there was one legislative decision that she would like to prioritise it would be the reclassification of cannabis from a category B to a category C drug, which she believes was "one of the most irresponsible and reprehensible decisions" of the Labour government at Westminster. She says that it was "utter folly" of the government to make that decision without having all the research information available about the grave prejudicial effects it has on the human system and "already the unwelcome consequences of that decision are being writ large".

At a Scottish level, she thinks that the Executive's policy is weak and requires a complete rethink. Annabel believes that we need to take a step right back to the stage where young people are tempted into experimenting with drugs; she thinks the Executive are sending out confusing messages to young people because they are too concerned about appearing cool. The Conservatives believe that young people want information about drugs that is currently missing - on health issues and the illegality of drugs, as well as looking for guidance on the subject and the comfort of boundaries. They also clash with the Executive over how rehabilitation is provided; there is a gap between when an addict comes to the point of saying 'I need help' and when they get that help, because there does not appear to be a public register of health facilities, so no-one knows what is available in their area.

Her third concern is the role of the methadone programme in Scotland. The Conservatives are not against methadone *per se*, recognising that it may be the only option that will take an individual out of a chaotic lifestyle of heroin addiction into a more orderly routine. But they are "deeply opposed" to its long term use. Annabel believes that methadone should only ever be used as a bridge to lead an addict to abstinence. She adds that research done at Glasgow University highlighted that the majority of people who have been put on methadone programmes would actually have preferred to be helped towards abstinence and she thinks it "is folly to disregard that", because methadone is more addictive than heroin. She praises the work done by the Maxie Richards Foundation in helping addicts work towards abstinence and thinks the Executive should open its eyes to this kind of treatment.

Annabel enjoys her role as an MSP, and her regrets she says are no different from anyone else: could she do more? She says that this is a pin that constantly pricks her but finds it comforting that her faith transcends all the activities she engages in and is an integral part of all that she does. She sees herself as a "fragile Christian operator", but thinks that might be a good thing if it means that she questions herself about how she is squaring up to her faith and to her church commitments every day: "I think that's a hair shirt I wear on a daily basis. It will keep on scratching me".

As for the church, she thinks the first thing it needs to do is say in a loud and clear voice what its Christian teaching is, and then carry out its obligations to its diverse flock without causing division, hurt, hostility and anger. "Everything has to be done with love and grace and that is something that I am sure the churches are mindful of, and it is perhaps something that adherents to individual churches have to be mindful of too".

Annabel's faith and politics are equally evident in her choice of desert island partners. Asked whom she would like to have with her if she was stranded on a desert island of the west coast of Scotland, she responded with: "The west coast? Noah. I would certainly be grateful to him for his proven skills". Her other chosen companion would be Winston Churchill; it is one of her big regrets that she never knew the war time leader. Despite being dogged at times by deep depression and being at a stage in his life when many commentators today would have written him off as being past it, he was "the political salvation of this country". So with Noah looking after her physical needs and Winston providing her mental stimulation, she feels life would be made that little more comfortable by a teapot, which would provide a point of sit down fellowship and some warm sustenance. However, she thinks that at least one of her companions might not be terribly enthusiastic at the prospect of a cup of tea, but she charitably says that she might be able to come up with a little hooch for it.

