

"Politics is all about passion"

Interview with Bill Aitken, Conservative MSP for Glasgow (published October 2009)

Arriving to meet Bill Aitken in his office in the Scottish Parliament, he apologises immediately for the amount of paper lying around: there are "bills everywhere". After meeting this self-confessed legislation "anorak", it is unsurprising that the Convener of the Justice Committee and former District Court judge would take such a keen interest in the legislative output of the Scottish Parliament, where Bill has been a Conservative MSP for Glasgow region since the first election in 1999.

Although he had always had an interest in politics, it was a bad footballing injury that provided the spur to becoming more involved in the Conservative Party as a youngster. A keen footballer in his youth, Bill sustained a bad cartilage injury and was no longer going to be able to play football at the level at which he wanted, so turned his attention to the newly opened local branch of the Young Conservatives. Describing his upbringing as that of a "poor boy, who lived in terrible housing" (a room & kitchen with an outside toilet in Maryhill in Glasgow); the Conservatives appealed to Bill as a "route out of that sort of thing for people that were ambitious". Finding the Young Conservatives to be "interesting, and also quite good from a social aspect", he progressed through the hierarchy of the movement, culminating in being the National Chairman in Scotland, at a time when the Young Conservatives were a "very formidable movement" with several thousand members across the country.

It is perhaps his early years that formed his commitment to pursuing constituency interests. Citing Glasgow City Councillor Gordon Rennie as his political role-model, he spoke with admiration about his memories of seeing Cllr Rennie (a Conservative councillor for Glasgow Woodside) trudging home late in the evening, "terribly tired and care-worn", as Bill himself headed home from football training. Both the dedication that Cllr Rennie showed to his constituents and the results he achieved within his ward obviously have had a lasting effect on Bill, and although acknowledging that the sheer volume of caseloads taken on by Cllr Rennie "eventually killed him", Bill speaks with some regret at the diminished role that constituency work plays in his job since being elected to the Scottish Parliament. As a City Councillor in Glasgow, he relished the constituency work; but now finds that as a result of the different demands placed on MSPs at Holyrood - and also considering his roles as Conservative Justice spokesman and Convener of the Scottish Parliament Justice Committee - constituency work "is a pretty low percentage of the many, many hours that I put in".

In addition to constituency work, legislative scrutiny is one of the areas he highlights as a particularly rewarding aspect of the job for him. His past role as a District Court judge in Glasgow and a "knack for legislation" means he regards himself as "a bit of a justice specialist" - ideal for his dual role as party justice spokesman and convener of the Justice Committee. He clearly revels in the intricacies of legislation, and cites the Sexual Offences Bill as the piece of legislation he is most proud of in the context of his role as Convener of the Justice Committee. Describing the work done on the legislation as a good example of the Committee system at its best he explains: "where you have 8 people, not necessarily sharing the same personal and certainly not the same political views -work together to achieve a constructive solution to problems which are concerning a lot of people." Quick to acknowledge the significant amount of time considering and negotiating aspects of the legislation, he is complementary of the role played by the Cabinet Secretary for Justice, Kenny MacAskill, in the process which resulted in several of the Government's initial proposals being significantly amended, creating a "workable" piece of legislation.

Responding to the fact that the churches took a keen interest throughout the deliberations of the Sexual Offences Bill, he acknowledges the importance both in his capacity as a committee convener and in his personal capacity as politician in listening to the point of view of Scotland's churches. However, when asked more generally about the role that churches should play in

politics, he is quite clear that their involvement should be minimal. Although paraphrasing from Matthew 22:21, in saying "I'm tempted to say 'Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's, and unto God that which is God's'"; Bill is adamant that the proper role of the church and state is one of distinct separation.

Moving on to his Conservative party justice role, and quoting the Cabinet Secretary for Justice Kenny MacAskill's well-publicised recent statement that "prison is a skoosh"; Bill believes that life for Scotland's prisoners is too comfortable. Although he is quick to point out that he is not advocating "keeping people in Dickensian squalor and inhumane conditions", he argues that the punishment element to Scotland's penal system is lacking. Suggesting that he has stayed as a paying customer in some hotels which are less comfortable than conditions in some of Scotland's jails, he believes that there needs to be consideration as to whether a TV in every room is really necessary, and whether prisoners should benefit from recreational activities and opportunities "which are denied to many people on the outside who are law abiding". While in the case of prisons, Bill obviously advocates a strengthening of provisions, he takes a typically conservative attitude to the role of the state in the lives of individuals more generally. He believes that much of the legislation passed by the Parliament has been unnecessary and therefore if he had a wish to create one piece of legislation, it would be a bill to annul "about 65-70% of the legislation that the Parliament has already passed". Fox hunting and fur farms are two particular issues which he mentions as having unnecessarily been the subject of the Scottish Parliament's attention.

Nevertheless, while disagreements on the issues of the day may be clear during heated moments on the floor of the Parliament, Bill is quick to say that relationships at Holyrood have generally always been very good, and there are glimmers of consensus, such as in the work of the Committees as already mentioned. There are, as in any workplace, occasional personality clashes, but on the whole, the MSPs at Holyrood get on very well. He recently sponsored former Labour Justice Minister Cathy Jamieson for a charity project [Cathy is undertaking a trek in Nepal in November in support of WhoCares? Scotland- an advocacy group for children & young people in the care system], which he admits is "not without physical risk", offering her double money if she did not return to Parliament! Such "banter" with opposition party members may seem flippant, but Bill is adamant that "any politician who carries the baggage of the chamber outwith the chamber is really quite sad". However, while he is pleased that relations are generally good, he is reminiscent of the type of debating where "veins would be out the neck, eyes bulging" that was often seen in the "more formidable debating forum" of Glasgow City Council meetings. "Politics is all about passion", he says, and in some respects he is not sure that Holyrood has entirely reached that point yet.

On the subject of the Parliament, and where Bill sees the devolution settlement heading in the future, his reaction to the recently published findings of the Calman Commission on Scottish Devolution is cautious. Praising Chairman Ken Calman, who, like Bill, attended Glasgow's Allan Glen's School (although Bill points out that he was a few years younger and did not really know Ken at that point, but later served as his city Councillor for many years); Bill acknowledges that he has done "a tremendous job", but there is a long way to go. He particularly highlights questions about the financial implications of any proposals for further devolution, and argues that the Commission did not provide answers, only suggestions: "Time will tell, but there is a lot of water to go under the bridge". Faced with the hypothetical question of a scenario in which the Conservatives take power at Westminster after the next General Election, Bill says only that "even Gordon Brown has smelled the coffee and woken up to the fact that there will be challenges" from the Conservatives. How might a Conservative UK Government affect dynamics between Westminster and Holyrood? Again, Bill did not want to speculate too far, but he was not sure that life would be particularly different: "I've every confidence that David Cameron would treat Scotland with respect, and there should not be any particular difficulties."

