

## The Absolutely Fabulous Carolyn Leckie

Interview with the Scottish Socialist MSP for Central Scotland (Published September 2004)

"I think I have got a bit of a reputation of being quite forthright" says the Socialist MSP Carolyn Leckie, but she says she prefers it that way, as it means she does not put a spin on what she says. Her determination not to compromise who she is, is illustrated by her assessment of the comments that surrounded her and her SSP colleague, Rosie Kane, when they first became MSPs - it was "just sexism". "I think some people think that working class women, like us particularly, just have no place in that Parliament and I am absolutely determined that they are reminded that working class women are in that Parliament and we are not going to change ourselves into something else just so they can be made a little more comfortable". She feels that generally women find it more difficult to be taken seriously unless they present themselves and behave like men.

Entering the Parliament proved to her that although it was set up with the claims that it was going to be more open, democratic and responsive, it is all "just a show". The Scottish Parliament does not have the pomp and ceremony that is found at Westminster but "it essentially does the same thing - keeps people out and politicians in jobs". This is why the SSP is anti-establishment, although it works within the Parliament by applying pressure from outside it by mobilising public opinion so that the bigger parties feel voters breathing down their necks, which can sometimes spur them on to support policies more in line with the Socialists. She says that many people are disillusioned and cynical about the Parliament because they thought it would support Scottish communities and listen to what they wanted, whereas they have found that even when they are vehemently against a school or a hospital closing, they can't get anywhere because "there is a predetermined agenda and they deliver it come hell or high water".

For Carolyn being an MSP is "just one tool in a box of many tools to try and change the world". Until the SSP was formed in 1998 she had never been a member of a political party because none of the other parties matched what she wanted, although she has been politically active since she fifteen - right to work marches, member of CND, trade unionist activist (internal fighting there had put her off other parties on the left). She had been looking for an outward looking socialist party that believed in an independent Scotland and she found that with the SSP. Carolyn says that the SSP are not right about everything but they are a very democratic party. Everything is agreed by the entire membership so "there are no appointments in the SSP, there are no instructions in the SSP, it is all collective and democratic", although it can be "advisory sometimes", rather than issuing direct instructions. Her response to people who say that socialism would never work and that it is a waste of time supporting the SSP, is "how can you possibly defend the status quo?" Her answer is to ask them if they are happy to stand by while millions starve, while children in Scotland live in poverty and when obesity kills people in the western world but starvation kills people in the third world.

In keeping with her party's ethos, Carolyn lives by the two principles of fairness and equality and completely rejects the idea of the financial market running people's lives. She believes that if people, poor or well off, are freed from economic concerns and from thinking that they need a bigger car and a bigger house, they would be happier and more content. Instead she says we are all bombarded with messages to aspire to material wealth and yet this leaves so many people disenchanted with their life, even if they achieve material success. It disgusts her that there are enough resources in the world for everyone to have a comfortable existence but so much injustice exists, to the extent that some individual's have so much wealth that they wouldn't be able to spend it in twenty lifetimes. Carolyn says that most children are idealists and are not essentially selfish, so there is a potential for humans to collectively care for each other but it is once the children get older that outside influences take their grip and they then believe in the right to seek individual gain. She states that this contradiction between our idealist

aspirations and the pressure to be 'successful' poses a psychological dilemma, which is why so many respondents to surveys are dissatisfied with their lives. She says this is the challenge for the SSP - to persuade people that there is a better way of running the world and that socialism is possible.

You could say that this non-materialistic caring vision for the world was biblical but Carolyn herself is not religious. She was brought up in an Orange Protestant family in the Gorbals, where her father was in the Blacks, a Mason and a Worthy Master in the Orange Order, although he was also a shop steward and a very active and principled trade unionist. She always thought that he was quite contradictory but feels that for her family joining organisations like the Orange Order was to do with tradition and belonging, having networks and being part of something. He died when she was eleven but she was seen as the black sheep of the family for questioning what she saw as contradictions in her father's life, like why he believed in equality for all regardless of religion or creed as a trade unionist but still supported the monarchy. She thinks that faith and religion can play a very positive role but that it can also be unhelpful because it can sometimes promote a regressive and reactionary agenda - "you have conservative elements and you have progressive elements - and like in other spheres of society, I don't think conservative elements are particularly helpful".

Her immediate short term concern is the NHS ("it is reaching meltdown"), although she would like to see Scotland moving ever more to the left and to see an independent Scotland in the longer term. For her, independence is a means to an end - it's about achieving a more equal Scotland, which it could do if it had fiscal autonomy and powers over immigration, asylum, pensions and taxation. She thinks a healthy SNP would be good because it would help the independence movement and so she would welcome someone who could put them on a healthy footing. Although she did offer friendly advice to them in terms of who should fill in their leadership vacancies - "I think Fergus Ewing [deputy leader candidate] would be a disaster for the SNP" as it would give the party a right wing identity and "that ground is already over occupied" but she was sure that they had the sense to realise that.

Outwith politics, Carolyn's biggest passion is her leisure time, friends and most importantly her teenage children. She says her daughters suffer from the same problem as Rosie Kane's children - it is very difficult for them to find ways to rebel when their mothers are "a wee bit non-conformist". What options are open to a teenager when your mum takes direct action, gets arrested and doesn't believe that the law and those in authority are right every time? Carolyn's 18 year old daughter has never had a drink despite the fact she is sent to the off licence to buy her mum a bottle of wine. All this conjures up the image of Jennifer Saunders and Joanna Lumley as the two somewhat fond of alcohol, non conformist, hippy and rule free Edina and Patsy from the TV programme *Absolutely Fabulous* with Edina's very sensible and proper daughter Saffy. To which Carolyn replied, "funny that you should say that because my oldest daughter's nickname is Saffy!"

