

Colin Fox (SSP MSP for Lothian) - Bread & Roses

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Colin Fox's earliest political memory is of marching down Queens Park in Glasgow in 1980 in a demonstration against unemployment. "I was going out with a girl and I can remember walking down on a bitterly cold February Saturday and thinking what kind of courtship is this taking her to an unemployment demonstration!" Inspired by the speaker from the Young Socialists, this march was to mark a sea change for the trainee chartered accountant - "that was probably the Rubicon I crossed between just being someone who criticised and talked about it to my friends. That was the day I decided to get involved."

Accountancy may seem an unlikely radicalising experience, but discovering that cousins and friends were earning almost 3 times as much as his very low trainee salary, and that one wealthy client he was assigned was being charged £50 to £60 an hour - equivalent to Fox's weekly wage - saw him leave as soon as he could for a job in the Council finance department, where he threw himself into the Young Socialists and being a union rep.

Hailing from a big Irish Catholic family (a "typical west of Scotland family"), Fox was an altar boy until the age of 16. He gave it up because he "became self-conscious of being taller than the priest", but "quite enjoyed" the experience. He recounts a tale of an election time when the local priest told the congregation he expected everyone to do their duty and vote Labour. Fox's father stormed out - "not because he didn't want to vote Labour but because he didn't want to be told to vote Labour". He never went back after that. Though Fox himself stopped attending Church at 18 and now classes himself as an atheist, his religious upbringing is not something he regrets, saying "I think it shaped me; I learned a lot of things, having a grounding in a Christian faith is no bad thing ... there are things in the Christian faith which are very close to the ideals that I hold dear - how we treat other people, how we live in a society, look after the most vulnerable, make the most of our moral obligations to distribute our rewards to people who are less well advantaged."

He is only happy about the Church's role in politics where there is complete separation between the church and the state. "That is not to take away the churches right to speak out on issues that are important to it, I would encourage that", he says. "I don't agree with the Catholic Church's teaching on abortion, divorce, contraception, women's emancipation, but I am perfectly sanguine about their right to put it forwards." Where Marx viewed religion as the opium of the people, Fox sees football as playing that role in Scotland today, for men at least. So the churches' role in speaking out he feels is valuable. He laughs: "Not every member of the Scottish Socialist Party is an irreconcilable atheist and Marxist Trotskyist like me and Tommy Sheridan!"

"I don't like to see anybody poor and suffering want, whether they are the youngest or oldest - that's what drives me." Being the father of 2 kids - aged 8 and 3 - has made him a "complete pushover" where children are concerned. "I hate to see kids in any desperate situation, whether it's here or abroad, without enough to eat, dying of dehydration - that makes me really angry". He is outraged that people can still die of hypothermia in Scotland "in this day and age".

As the oldest of 40 grandchildren, Fox was very close to his grandparents who influenced him greatly. "They worked all their lives, they are very proud, they won't take help and they won't take any charity. My grandfather is scared in case he gets benefits he's not entitled to." They are representative of a generation to whom the idea of being in debt was anathema and for whom a strong sense of community was central, he says.

Music and culture are very important to Fox - not the most natural association people make with his party, often classed as "grey, monolithic" and linked, "whether we like it or not", with the repression of the communist bloc era. People expect the SSP to talk about poverty and disadvantage, and if they are to be known for just one thing, he is happy with that focus, yet

believes there is much more to a fulfilling life - "I don't think anybody wants to live in a society where there is only bread available. I would like to see bread and roses." He loves to see how art and culture moves people. His uncle, a contract electrician - "an ordinary guy from Motherwell"- is the best painter he has seen, motivated by sheer "love and enjoyment".

"I am a great believer that there is something unique and an exceptional talent in every single human being - even the most vicious, horrible killer - there is something that is unique, something worthwhile, something they can contribute to make the world a better place."

Anyone who witnessed Fox's rendition of Robert Burns' *A Man's a Man for a' That* as a protest against taking the oath of allegiance to the Queen, will not be surprised to learn that the Bard is a source of inspiration. It's less his poems, however, and more his colourful life, which Fox finds inspirational. Paul Robeson, the black American singer, actor, athlete, and activist is someone he regards as an "awesome figure." Tony Benn, whom Fox describes as "a wonderful character" and whom he has met on several occasions, is one of the reasons he got involved in politics. As someone who relished being unpredictable, Fox feels one of his heroes, Leon Trotsky, is a bit too predictable as an answer, yet the Russian Revolution, for him "still stands out as an occasion when the ordinary people rose up". As a fan of Lewis Grassie Gibbon he was thrilled to find a copy of *Spartacus*, while browsing in a second-hand bookshop one day while waiting to 'sign on'- "Here was one of my literary heroes writing about my political heroes", he says. Someone who *doesn't* impress Colin Fox is Fidel Castro (unlike colleague Tommy Sheridan, who is a great fan). "Castro has an appalling record. He does not allow people to speak out and I think that is terrible and I won't condone it. I won't gloss over it. It doesn't encourage people to think that a socialist model is free, democratic, diverse, and celebrates what is different about people."

Juggling work as an MSP with the responsibility for looking after his kids he shares with his partner (a midwife) is difficult. He is determined to play a full part in their upbringing, insisting that he wants "to see them grow up". Having no legal background has meant that getting to grips with the workings of the Scottish Criminal Justice System, for his role serving on the Parliament's Justice 2 Committee, has proved time consuming. He jokes that he has been assigned this committee because he is probably the only one of his party colleagues who hasn't been to jail.

Conscious of the weight of expectation the SSP now bears, the questions of how committed they are going to be to the parliament, carrying out their committee duties, and the responsibilities this entails, Fox and his colleagues find themselves in a dilemma. They don't believe that the Parliament will deliver the kind of society they what want and are mindful of the experience of socialists in parliaments internationally where the tendency has been to conform to the "rules and parameters" of the institution, to be "crushed by the machine". "This Parliament has hardly any powers", he says. "it has no powers over Dungavel, it has no powers over Faslane, no powers over employment" - all key issues for the Scottish Socialists.

It's no accident, Fox believes, that disengagement from the political process is more acute in poor constituencies as witnessed by the disparity in turnout rates. People think all politicians are just in it for themselves, he says, they see too little change in their area, and perceive little choice between the main parties. So they just "opt out". Fears over unpaid poll tax bills mean many who are eligible to vote are not registered. He's not claiming that the SSP are necessarily perceived as being any different. "The challenge is as much for us as for anybody else" he acknowledges. The party desperately want to engage what is after all their target audience. People aren't apathetic, they want change - they just don't believe the politicians on offer are going to deliver change.

