

## **"Churches see social trends at the coalface, possibly before we see them"**

**Interview with Derek Brownlee, Conservative MSP for South of Scotland (Published July 2008)**

Derek Brownlee joined the Conservative party through frequenting the Tory club in Selkirk where he grew up, partly because it was one of the best places to go for drinks and socialising. His family wasn't political and "certainly wasn't Conservative" and although he makes clear he didn't fall into politics, his was perhaps a rather nonchalant stroll into political life, "it's one of those funny things that seems to happen to people." When he first stood in 2003 he didn't expect to get elected; and if it hadn't been for David Mundell's resignation in 2005 it is doubtful that he would have stood in 2007. He explains, "I didn't stand in a seat [in 2003] where I thought I was going to get in, I ranked in lists in a position which I didn't think would get me elected and then someone resigns and it's all big changes. I was in a very odd position, effectively, someone phones you up and says "Would you like to be an MSP?" - you've got 24 hours to decide. In some sense I thought if I said no I would always wonder what would have happened, so go for it."

Brownlee may have moved from his previous career as an accountant into politics but he has found himself immersed again in figures as his party's spokesperson on finance. This was no accident, however, as his greatest interest is in the financing of the Parliament, "how we decide what we spend and how we spend it" particularly at this time of tighter purse strings. He believes the generous size of the block allocation for the last 8 years "has stopped us having to make difficult choices", quite easily introducing new schemes like free personal care and concessionary travel but that in the "environment we are in now, we won't be able to do these new things, we might not be able to do some of the things we're still doing without stopping other things". This he hopes, will lead to more of an informed debate about what the Parliament should be focusing on, a debate that he believes will be set and settled by the public taking a view on what it wants the politicians to prioritise, "because at the end of the day politicians generally fall into line with what the public think. I don't think it's the other way round like a lot of people seem to think it is."

Questions on the financing of the Parliament also have implications for the devolution settlement as he goes on: "there is a lot of unfinished business around the way the Parliament operates, in terms of the way it looks at how it spends money it's got, the priorities it chooses and the way it's funded. People talk about the devolution settlement, but if it was a settlement then we wouldn't have every party agreeing that it needed to change, so I think there's some fundamental issues there." This leads us nicely into constitutional arrangements and society's involvement in this debate.

Of course the devolution settlement isn't just about money and Brownlee is anxious that the Calman Commission "gets it right": "The SNP are very clear on what they want the future to look like and I think we need a clear view on what staying part of the union looks like, so I think the Calman Commission needs to be pretty thorough; it needs to look at all the issues and engage with Scottish society. Looking back, the Constitutional Convention tried to, and to be fair to it a lot of Scottish society didn't engage back, the business community wasn't good at engaging with it, the Conservative Party certainly wasn't good, it didn't want to know. So I think everyone just has to try and get involved in discussion about what we want the country to look like. If we get it right then I think there is no reason why we shouldn't have a stable system of government where you have a Scottish Parliament, a Scottish Government with a huge amount of autonomy, but still have all the benefits of working together with the rest of the UK".

Putting the constitutional differences with the SNP to one side is an approach which he argues is possible and pragmatic: "on day-to-day issues, on a lot of things, we actually agree, on some things we don't, but on a lot of things we do." His party's relationship with the SNP has been a lot more open than with the previous administration, partly because the SNP "always has to work with other parties to get anything through"; and he argues that this situation leaves the Tories holding the balance of power. "Typically if we support the SNP they tend to win, if we oppose them, it's a generalisation but if we oppose them they tend to lose. If the Conservatives win the next general election, not only would they be less hostile to the Scottish Government than Labour has been

since the SNP came to power but you would also have an interesting scenario where effectively the Conservatives are in power at Holyrood and at Westminster at some level and then it's just a question of what you do with that power."

Taking a more combative approach to the SNP at Holyrood would also "play in to the worst stereotypes that people in Scotland have of the Conservative Party which is the party that says no to everything". He is clearly proud of the co-operative spirit that his party has taken since May 2007 and, although he cites Margaret Thatcher as his most influential individual, he acknowledges that she was a rare character, far more divisive and polarising in her approach than most: "in the Scottish context the most successful politicians are the ones who try and get people to work with them rather than to divide. I guess that is partly to do with the different system as well, you don't win in a PR system by being the most popular minority, you win by carving out a majority in whatever way you can do it."

Polarising is what he sees the churches doing in US politics - "not necessarily through their own fault" - but, he thinks the relationship here is far healthier and, with the caveat that you need to be careful about mixing religion and politics, he is positive about the role the churches can play. "Every church deals with many of the consequences of policy failure. I think churches see social trends at the coalface, possibly before we see them and of course you see a cross section of society." This is valuable to MSPs because, "we are probably in quite a bubble, we have our own families and friends dictated by our previous backgrounds and we have those we mix with in politics, that's not a cross section of society by any means."

So churches can bring stories and experiences to politicians about people's lives and also about the services that they provide in their communities. "We've tended to think the answer to providing services is the same throughout the country, to do a nationalised system, and I think some of the lessons we can learn is how a localised service run by different people in different places is sometimes better." As long as churches are seen as apolitical in the party sense they can actually be quite political in the non party sense, "you can take a stand on particular issues and we won't necessarily thank you for that but it's actually quite helpful to have a range of views. None of us should be afraid of a debate on these kind of things."

We turn to poverty as an issue that the churches are deeply concerned about, and he argues that the key to tackling poverty is dealing with worklessness. "There are some pretty horrendous statistics about the proportion of the working age population in some parts of the country who are not working; there must be some families where you go through a couple of generations of nobody really having had sustained work. It's not good, it dampens people's aspirations; if they don't see people around them working that just feeds into a culture that there is no point in trying, or they can't. You still need government to pick up the people who fall through the net; we probably haven't been sensitive enough to the need to ensure that as many people as possible are actually in meaningful work".

The worst thing about his job, he finds, is when he is faced with a problem from constituents which he can't actually do anything about. "A lot of people think their last option is to come to a politician and if we can't sort it who can and that's really depressing. The negative side if you focus on it too much could actually quite depress you". However, he finds being "inside" (with the qualification "we think we're the centre of things and of course we're not") to be "absolutely fascinating".

