

Jamie Stone,
Liberal Democrat MSP for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross.
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"Sometimes you have to have the guts to lead"

Jamie Stone may be one of Parliament's most affable characters, yet right now he's angry. The issue at the very forefront of his mind is a proposal to downgrade maternity services in Caithness. For some pregnant women it would mean a 200 mile round trip. "This seems to me utterly wrong," he protests. "What do you do if you're a poor single mum living in Wick? That single mum may not have a partner to support her. What happens if it's snowing? What happens if it's so bad that the helicopter can't fly? Then we're talking a tragedy waiting to happen - a child's life, a mother's life." He shows me a petition from mums in Caithness being submitted to the Petitions Committee: "How dare the bureaucrats do this? Who do they think they are?"

Brought up "on a wee farm" in his constituency, he describes himself as being "mildly involved with politics" as a student at St Andrews; politics was nevertheless, in the family, as his forefathers had been provosts of Tain and his father was a councillor. When his father died suddenly in 1986, Jamie won the by-election for the ward as an independent. "Being a councillor is quite tough," he recalls; "it's point blank range - street corner - people putting a finger on your chest, saying 'what are you going to do about this, why haven't you sorted that'." Impressed by Charles Kennedy, he joined the SDP, becoming constituency chairman. Increasingly convinced of the case for devolution, he was appointed the Council's representative on the Scottish Constitutional Convention.

As the father of 3 state-educated children now at university, the future for the next generation is close to his heart. Sustainable employment in remote areas, protecting the Gaelic language and promoting the "rich mix of culture" in Scotland are priorities for Jamie Stone alongside health, social services, education. "You can regard Scotland as a beautiful diamond with many facets," he explains. "As the whole world becomes homogenised into a sort of 'pizza hut international' of low-grade uniformity, I think the human soul cries out for difference, for interest in something better - and a rich tapestry in a country has an appeal we can build on in terms of tourism." He's passionate about his enterprise portfolio and particularly about encouraging business, along with the Parliament and Executive and bodies like the STUC, to accept young people on placements.

He recalls an incident when a constituent came to him for help after the 4 nappies a day he had been allocated to look after his elderly incontinent mum, were being reduced to 3: "He broke down saying he couldn't cope. I remember saying if I sort anything in this life, my friend, I'll sort you out - my secretary had to calm me down. So when people say that MSPs are just glorified social workers, well if that's how they choose to describe me then I'm very proud to be described as that." It's situations like this that make Jamie Stone angry. Seeing people in difficulty because "something that should be done is not being done" that really gets to him. Yet he doesn't get angry in political debate. "I don't even come close to losing it in the chamber - not faintly."

Stone's Christian faith is very important to him though he views his faith as "imperfect" emphasising that he's "not 'Churchy' *per se* - I just go to Church and it's important in my life but I don't bang on about it...I always think that if I start to thump the Bible, and say 'oh I'm a Christian', I rather fear I hear God falling about with laughter!". "I hope I don't come over as a 'pushing it down your throat' type of person... I think it's quite good to look at yourself and say 'wait a minute' - amidst the political ambition and this and that - '*am I really doing the best?*'"

Though he toyed with the idea of becoming a minister, and it's always remained at the back of his mind, he regards himself as "simply not good enough" for something he views as a vocation. While not a member of the Kirk Session he enjoys going to Church, taking part in Church activities, and a "bit of good preaching". His faith influences his politics though he worries he is

possibly "too shy" about it. "One is encouraged to go out there and spread the gospel," he reflects, but "I think I got scared by the Christian Union when I was a student - they were too ... 'are you saved?'" Asked to do a reading in Church, he found it "absolutely terrifying ... I could make a speech in parliament absolutely no bother at all, but getting up there with that huge big Bible - wow! I found my knees were shaking."

"I utterly applaud the work that's being done by the Churches," he continues; "the impact of the parliamentary office has been really very surprising". Westminster colleagues remark that the Church plays a much bigger role than at Westminster and is perceived more sympathetically at Holyrood, he says, which he attributes partly to the SCPO, and the surprising number of church elders in the parliament across all parties, but also to the Scottish Churches not being shy about debating matters of politics. "It used to infuriate some politicians - still does to this day - if the church dares to say something, but it's a long historic tradition in Scotland." Seeing church representatives in the gallery during debates sends a powerful message: "They're not slow at coming forward," he notes, approvingly, "and a bit like my own imperfect version of faith, it's very good at asking MSPs to look to their conscience and do what's right."

Unusually, Stone's political hero is not a household name, but Harry Miller, with whom he served as a councillor and who died just before the 1999 election. Miller, as Chair of the Council's Housing Committee was appalled by the plight of a travelling family of a mother and 4 children suffering from a wasting disease, living in "wretched conditions", and liaised with social work, and health services to buy a house for the family near the hospital. A vigilante group objected with petitions, demonstrations, and letters to councillors which Stone describes as "evil". Councillors were "picked off one-by-one" and the vote 2 days before Christmas was lost: "I remember Harry saying 'But we're all God's children'." The family are still in the same house though 2 of the children have since died. "Harry was so brave and took the flak. People were horrible to him and he stuck to his guns...it's so easy to buckle but he didn't - that was courage". He was, reflects Stone, "a wonderful man, so brave - really cared. I still feel the injustice of it all".

"We have to demonstrate more fully that we can make a difference to people's lives", says Stone. People need to see the benefit of local influence over decision-making. "You can't just be a weathercock - sometimes you have to have the guts to lead on issues." Success in attracting the public into visiting the parliament and using the website needs to be built on, because "there's no doubt about it - once people have been here they then begin to take an interest. Our outreach work is going to have to be upped still further". He wants committees to meet outside Edinburgh more, "fully advertised for maximum public access...We have to get the message over to young people particularly that this really matters... We've got to be almost like missionaries about this". He's encouraged by Modern Studies classes he's met - "The younger generation are way ahead of mine", he insists; "they ask such bright questions and are so 'on the ball' about issues. I don't think anyone of my age would have *dared* ask an MP a question...I'm glad that deference has gone".

He has high hopes for the new building: "It has to be about the Scottish people not just parliamentarians. If during a recess, a string quintet wants to play then absolutely they can use the chamber... It's about people saying let's go to the parliament for lunch". Illustrating the difference with Westminster, he recalls Donald Dewar stopping to talk to a workman digging a hole in the road who had called out "hullo there, big Donald!": "This Westminster attitude of 'oh I'm off now to deal with matters of state, I may see you in the constituency when I deign to come back' - that's absolutely *not on*."

