

"LIVE AND LET LIVE"

Interview with JEREMY PURVIS, Lib Dem MSP for Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale
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Jeremy Purvis has a very strong conviction that a politician should be an enabling person. He believes that his job is to make public policy that will help people to run their own lives but "we absolutely should not run people's lives for them". Therefore he feels that people should be allowed to make their own choices, whether that is relying on their faith or looking up to David Beckham. This high regard for personal autonomy has prompted Jeremy to introduce his Member's Bill on euthanasia and physician-assisted suicide.

At a very young age he wrote an "advance directive" for himself, at a time when it was not recognised legally or by the medical profession. He argues that, now that people have the right to choose to have treatment withheld or withdrawn knowing that it will lead to their death, it is "inhumane" that people don't have the right to ask for *assistance* to help them die. He gave the example of a case in England where Mrs Z wanted to fly to Switzerland to seek medical assistance "to have an easier death" but her husband would be charged with an offence if he bought the air ticket to allow her to do that. Jeremy thinks it is wrong that the man "will become a criminal for doing something out of love and compassion for his suffering wife".

He has started the process of trying to get the law changed in Scotland to prevent people in that situation becoming criminals. He thinks that we are mature enough in Scotland to have a debate on euthanasia, and in that context he found the Moderator of the Church of Scotland's comments (in support of wider debate on the issue) "very, very welcome". He believes that no-one has anything to fear from the debate because people who believe in the sanctity of life also at times question the role of God whenever suffering and pain occur.

He thinks that the debate will be a long one and he is currently putting his consultation paper together on euthanasia and physician assisted suicide which will be out for a three month consultation soon. He is well aware that he is challenging the fundamental beliefs of many people and as a result his member's debate on dying with dignity was a very polarised affair, with people debating two completely different set of moral values, which he felt was not beneficial to anyone. He hopes that at the end of the process there will be more areas of agreement in terms of providing support for people nearing the end of their lives and "ultimately even if I am not successful in seeking to change the law, I think it is justified if it has drawn more attention to hospital care and the hospice movement". He thinks that it is an issue of conscience for colleagues who have a lot of different views on the issue, while the Executive will remain neutral on the subject (as it is a Member's Bill), so it is a case of waiting to find out what the decision of the Parliament will be.

Jeremy thinks that churches do have an important role to play because they represent many people but he doesn't think they should have a greater or lesser role than any other representative body. He believes that faith is a very personal thing, and he doesn't share the views of some of his colleagues who closely align their religious beliefs with their political beliefs. He says that when politicians "put their religious beliefs ahead of political argument and interests for either their constituents or their area, then I think that raises questions". Again a lot of it goes back to the fact that he can't stand people dictating to others how they should run their lives based on their particular moral code - he hates that kind of prejudice. He would like Scotland to become a more open, tolerant and liberal society with a legal system that has "as light a touch as possible". He also believes that those in power have a duty to share out wealth and to find the best way of spending taxes.

Despite the focus on euthanasia the issues closest to Jeremy's heart are agriculture, land-based industry, and the economy in rural areas. He said that they are his main issues by default because they are relevant to his constituency (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale, which was represented by David Steel for many years; when he retired in 2003, Jeremy stood as the candidate in his former boss's constituency - he used to be David Steel's research assistant). At 30 years old Jeremy is the second youngest MSP in the Parliament (Richard Baker narrowly pips him to the post for the title of youngest), but he says that he has colleagues twice his age that are just as radical and idealistic as he is. He feels that despite the fact he is aging very fast in the job and that his hair is "falling out at rather a depressing rate", he is still "within grasping distance of being young" so he hopes to be able to raise the profile of the Parliament amongst younger people. As Finance Spokesperson for the party he has also come up with some different thinking on how the Parliament should be financed in the future - "fiscal federalism".

Jeremy is also one of a very rare breed - a Liberal Democrat elected into an incumbent government. He says that Liberals "tend to be aspiring people". They also tend to rely on self-discipline according to Jeremy as he says that they don't really have any party discipline - "we do have some but it is akin to herding cats". He adds though that they are a team and meet every Tuesday for their parliamentary party group meeting.

Having worked in the political arena for some time before becoming an MSP he was prepared for most things, although he found adjusting to the personal side of things fairly stressful. He was elected on Thursday, and attended his surgery in Peebles the very next day, where people came to him with "very personal problems and sometimes horrendous problems and inevitably it has an impact on you on a personal level". (On his website, he claims to have taken up over 900 cases on behalf of constituents and held over 100 advice surgeries since he was elected in May 2003.)

He has virtually given up any semblance of a social life since becoming an MSP but if he has any spare time he loves art and design, particularly painting. One of his own original works is displayed in his office. And who do you think "a very mild mannered", 30 year old Lib Dem MSP would most like to have stranded with him on a desert island? Peter Ustinov and Victoria Wood apparently, armed with whisky and cigars.

Jeremy's own personal motto is to "live and let live". When I said that I probably wouldn't be able to get that James Bond theme out of my head for the rest of the day, he corrected me that the song is "live and let die - but that's a bit too close to my Bill".

