

## "Keep Smiling"

### Interview with Jo Swinson, Lib Dem MP for East Dunbartonshire (Published June 2008)

Like many MPs, Jo Swinson joined her chosen political party at University, but unlike many this wasn't very long ago. She was elected at 25 and is currently the youngest MP in Westminster. The Liberal Democrats stance on education, particularly a penny on tax for education was one of two key issues that drew her in. "I was in education at the time and I believed now as then that it was the key to solving so many problems in society." Proportional representation was the other draw, growing up in Milngavie which was in a constituency with Clydebank: "it seemed like we were never really going to count, Labour was always going to get in," and so she signed up at the Freshers Fayre.

She first stood for election in 2001, in Hull against John Prescott, and then for the Scottish Parliament in 2003, this time in the area that she grew up in. It was from her home constituency that she was elected to Westminster in 2005 and this is hugely significant to her; "what's most important is that I'm representing people in an area that I feel passionately about."

Life expectancy of someone in her constituency is 8, 9 or 10 years higher than someone two miles down the road in Drumchapel she explains, and "this is exactly the kind of inequality we want to stamp out by improving the outcomes of those in more deprived areas." She believes education is key here alongside various healthcare initiatives and a "much more simple tax system". On taxation she goes on, "Our policy is to reduce [tax] by four pence in the pound. That actually makes it more sensible for people to get out of unemployment and get into work, and you can pay for that by changing the tax at the higher end of the tax system and indeed taxes on wealth that has just been accumulated or passed down."

Although she doesn't think she is always in touch with what today's young people are thinking she has been a strong advocate on their behalf, particularly on ending the unfair discrimination on the minimum wage which sees young people aged 16 or 17 having to work 5 hours more on a typical 8 hour shift to earn the same as a 22 year old on the minimum wage. She is also strongly supporting a Private Member's Bill to lower the voting age to 16. When asked about the positive insights she brings as a young MP, she ruminates, "I suppose I do have a different background and a different set of cultural reference points. I'm very involved in campaigning for Parliament to open up and use new technologies to become closer to people and I've begun podcasting and use Facebook, I've just signed up to Twitter recently, which is sort of, mini-blogging. I try to use different ways to connect with my constituents, I've got more than 600 constituents signed up to a regular email consultation, which is something that you just wouldn't have the resources to do using old technologies of post."

She alludes to her "geeky" political sensibilities a number of times and on the new government in Scotland she is philosophical, "it's interesting to see a new form work, to have a minority government, so that it's not engrained that it always has to be some sort of formal partnership, you know, as an almost experiment to show that with devolution you can have different types of political outcomes and that you get that with a proportional system. That can hopefully reflect more people and of course, the Scottish Lib Dems, like the other parties, are working with SNP on issues where we agree, which is entirely sensible. And then on issues where we don't, robustly hold them to account."

Holyrood and Westminster can be a bit apart she admits, and it can be difficult to retain relationships and communication because of the Parliamentary timetable but she sees the establishment of the Constitutional Commission as something very positive that has come out of joint working between Westminster and Holyrood. "It needs the support of Westminster politicians and ideally the support of Scottish politicians, not necessarily undermining it with strange u-turns."

She is also very positive about the joint working that goes on in the select committee of which she is member, the Environmental Audit committee. "You take an issue that you are interested in and, rather than go to a position immediately, you look at all the evidence ... If the public thought more about what goes on at select committees, they'd possibly have a higher opinion of politics generally ... it's 100 miles away from the yah boo politics that you see at Prime Minister's Questions, which I suppose has its place as entertainment, but doesn't further the political understanding in the country very much."

She believes Government does listen to what select committees say: "we had a report on bio-fuels in January which was very concerned about the food implications across the world, and also indeed the environmental implications - whether or not deforestation was happening to plant bio-fuel crops - and the Government is now reviewing its own bio-fuels policy, partly as a result of the Report".

As a Liberal Democrat Shadow Minister for Foreign Affairs, she sees Climate Change as one of the key issues facing the world as it is the poor who are going to feel it first and getting an international agreement by the end of 2009 is vital. On her role she jokes, "It's one of the things about the job, it's the entire world that you've got to know about!" She mentions Afghanistan, "We are making some headway, but it's going to take a very long time for us to rebuild the country, because that's basically what we need to do."

She has been receiving email updates from a constituent with a colleague in Zimbabwe and is sickened by the images from there: "it's one of those situations that is just so horrendous, and actually so difficult to know what the solution is because the British Government doesn't have very much influence in Zimbabwe. It can try and influence other partners in the region."

But the first issue that she mentions is Iran, "I think there's a lot of concern about Iran's nuclear development and the American reaction to that. We hope we will have a President of the US who's perhaps less hawkish after the elections. I don't think that will be the case if McCain wins."

Aid is important, particularly in the wake of natural disasters but, as she argues and discusses in more detail, the wider issues of trade must be addressed. "What's also important is about trade, about giving countries the tools and economies, the opportunities, to develop so that they can stand on their own two feet." This means removing protectionist policies at EU level because at the moment "we are having a very uneven playing field for developing countries when it comes to trading with them and that really does damage their economies."

She is aware of the work of the churches in this area, particularly in the fair trade movement in her constituency and, although she believes in a separation of church and state, she is very positive about the churches' role in politics, particularly bringing together people who have shared views on certain issues and "rightly using that collective voice to be heard by their elected representatives."

When asked for her best piece of advice she says, "keep smiling, there's always a way of finding something good in the situation" and this optimism shines through. As well as being the youngest MP she is also the only female Scottish Liberal Democrat MP and she is Chair of the Campaign for Gender Balance. She doesn't dwell on the Lib Dems' poor record on gender equality and looks to the future: "we've got great talented women out there and we just need to make sure we get them elected".

