

"From Girls' Brigade Leader to Convener of the Communities Committee"

INTERVIEW WITH KAREN WHITEFIELD MSP for Airdrie and Shotts (Published March 2005)

A few years ago during a September holiday weekend, Karen Whitefield, her mum and her gran were at the shores of Loch Lomond enjoying a cup of tea. Two women kept glancing over at her, prompting her gran to say that they must know Karen, although she had no idea who they were. Eventually they came over and spoke to her. Free concessionary bus travel had just been introduced and they were two Airdrie pensioners who had taken advantage of this to have a day out; they just wanted to tell their local MSP how pleased they were with the scheme. Karen says that, for her, the Scottish Parliament is all about "improving people's quality of life and working on domestic issues which affect every day life that often matter to them the most".

As a youthful 35 year old, Karen grew up in the 80s during the time of the Conservative government when "in my opinion, people particularly from much of Lanarkshire where I grew up, were not being given the opportunity or the life that I thought they deserved". It is the needs of her constituents that drive her political work - advice given to her by her former MP, John Reid.

Karen is definitely a warrior for her constituency, which is where she grew up. Much of her constituency is made up of former steel and mining communities and she wants to see the spirit of those communities harnessed so that they are given a new purpose and allowed to improve and develop. She is fighting for Airdrie and Shotts to be given their fair share of resources, which is why she has a surprising interest in transport. Karen believes that transport "is an issue about exclusion" because it is people who are less well off that rely on public transport to get to things like job interviews. She has also been campaigning to get the Bathgate to Airdrie railway line reopened as she feels that link to Edinburgh will have a huge impact on her constituents' quality of life.

Becoming a politician had never crossed Karen's mind before devolution. She had been personal assistant to Rachel Squire, MP for Dunfermline West, and always saw herself as a backroom person assisting those at the forefront. Since she was only in her twenties at the time, she felt that she had plenty of time to get involved in frontline politics later on in her life if that was a direction she felt she should go in. But, after becoming very involved in the campaign and the referendum for the Scottish Parliament, people in her constituency encouraged her to stand because they felt it was important that all of society should be represented in the new institution; so she was persuaded to go forward for selection.

On becoming an MSP in 1999, she wasn't prepared for the hostility that MSPs faced from some outside quarters when they first entered the Parliament: "people were criticised for the way they spoke - the women for the way they dressed and for the contributions that they made". She says that the criticism that she and others received made them determined to get on with the job and prove themselves and as a result they have outlasted some of their biggest critics. Despite the hostility, entering Parliament has been the biggest highlight of her career and she has no regrets ("I think you have to be positive about things and no matter what happens you learn something from those experiences").

The criticism that she faced at the start has not hampered her political career. She was appointed ministerial parliamentary aide to the Lord Advocate from February 2002 until March 2003. As an aide her role was to be the link between the Lord Advocate, the Solicitor General and the Parliament making them aware of parliamentary processes, and assisting them if they required it. As someone with no legal background she said that the post was a great opportunity for her to get a real understanding of the prosecution service in Scotland. Her political star continues to rise, as she is now Convener of the Communities Committee. When asked what ministerial portfolio she would ideally like if she were offered one sometime in the future, she replies that it is not something she thinks about: "my main priority is being a good constituency MSP".

As well as her other MSP duties, a significant amount of Karen's time is taken up with improving the rights of shop workers. She is currently promoting her Member's Bill on Christmas Day and New Year's Day trading, which aims to safeguard those two days for shop workers. "I am concerned that shop workers increasingly are feeling that, in a society where they are expected - and are often very happy - to work seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day, they can't say there are two days out of the year when they can do whatever they like". She says that shops are increasingly beginning to open on New Year's Day and believes that in time this will extend to shops also opening up for business on Christmas Day. She argues that those in the retail trade who shout loudest against the idea of shops remaining shut on those holidays are "not the people who will be operating the tills or staffing the doors on the days that the shops are open". However, a number of retailers have responded positively to her consultation - such as Scotmid, the Federation of Grocers and Habitat, who would welcome everyone operating on an even playing field. She says that the majority of MSPs have indicated that they will support her Bill, with the notable exception of the Conservatives, which she says is "a little disappointing".

As for the Member's Bill system itself she says that although the Bill takes up a tremendous amount of her time, it is very worthwhile because it means that "we actually are able to pass legislation that people want and they think there is a need for". She says that the system at Holyrood is much better than at Westminster, which has a lottery system, in which it all comes down to whether your name is pulled out of the hat. The result is that someone could be an MP for twenty years and never have the opportunity to take forward a Member's Bill, whereas at Holyrood there are no such restrictions as any MSP can take one forward. She says that the various parliamentary stages will weed out any Bills that "don't add up or if there appears to be no need for them".

Outside of her obviously busy political life, Karen has found gardening her favourite hobby, which has come as a bit of a surprise to her as she could never fathom the attraction gardening held for her mother and grandparents; it seems genetics has won out because, now that she has a garden of her own, "it is an obsession". What she likes most about it is that there is an end product because as a politician it often takes a long time to see something come to completion, whereas she can look at her garden and think "I have achieved that" (should you ever want to send her flowers, sweetpeas are her favourite).

Karen is unique in that she is the only MSP who was in the Girl's Brigade - she was also a Girl's Brigade Officer - and she has kept the connection up as an advisor to the Girl's Brigade Scotland National Management Board. Her faith and beliefs were shaped and nurtured by what she learnt in the Girl's Brigade and she has been a member of the Church of Scotland for a number of years now.

What is the former Girl's Brigade leader's biggest vice? "Probably food"; which is why she would invite Gary Rhodes with her to an uninhabited island, along with Nelson Mandela, whom she admires greatly. She would ask Gary Rhodes to take some of his kitchen equipment and some food with him so he could cook them some amazing culinary delights, while "Nelson Mandela could just bring his experiences".

At present though, with her constituency duties, Convenership of the Communities Committee and her Member's Bill, being on a desert island spending her day listening to Nelson Mandela and being fed by Gary Rhodes seems like a far-fetched fantasy. Karen does not know if she will spend the rest of her working life as an MSP - bearing in mind that she has quite a long time before she reaches retirement age - but "one thing I do know is that I don't want to go on ad infinitum!"

