

"Norman Tebbit was the best Prime Minister we never had"

Margaret Mitchell, MSP for Central Scotland (published July 2003)

An ideal day for Margaret Mitchell would be a snowy day round the Aga (that's a big cooker that stores heat to the uninitiated!) at home with her husband, a chartered accountant, and their two West Highland terriers, Bill and Ben. "It's the contrast between the warmth of the Aga and the cold outside," she explains, though it doesn't mean she's the world's greatest cook, she hastens to add.

Margaret Mitchell is one of the Parliament's new crop of MSPs, a former primary school teacher and Justice of the Peace. She may be a new MSP but she's no political innocent, having several years' experience of being a local councillor - and, as the only Tory, leader of the Conservative group. Before her election she also operated as a special adviser to David McLetchie and Lord James Douglas-Hamilton.

Politics is "in your blood" she says. Growing up, she was concerned at what she perceived to be a paternalistic style of 'the state knows best' government characterised by what she felt was excessive power exerted by Trade Unions. It seemed she says, a "case of the 'tail wagging the dog'". She joined the Conservative Party in her teens, convinced that there should be 'less government', with bureaucracy kept to a minimum and the state playing an enabling role. She is angered when people are 'given the run around' and are not having their views heard. A further *bête noire* for the Central Scotland MSP is the dogma of "that's the way we've always done things". "Politicians should be mature enough to welcome and give credit to good ideas," she argues.

Drug dealers are a subject on which she feels very strongly, and she advocates imposing maximum sentences on those convicted. Drug misuse causes "so much misery in so many forms to their own families and to the wider community through the crime they commit to feed their habit" notes the Tories' Deputy Spokesperson on Justice & Home Affairs.

The biggest surprise upon entering parliament has been just how fast moving the environment is - even in terms of how much the process of voting is speeded up by electronic means. The volume of mail - both postal and email - is another shock; most MSPs receive emails in their hundreds each day. Asked if being a woman in politics has any influence on how she operates, she says "I've never really thought about it". She muses that perhaps women are more used to juggling several competing demands at once which can be helpful in managing competing demands in politics. Working at the 'chalk face' in a primary school in Airdrie, Lanarkshire, where many of the children came from very deprived areas, was a useful training ground for entering politics, she feels, as was her time as a JP. Some of the same children she taught she later saw in court, and youth crime is a problem she clearly feels is one of the biggest issues facing the country. There was, she says, often an automatic antagonism from some of the young people towards those in authority, which frequently stemmed from the home. Teaching parenting skills could, she believes, help some parents cope better with bringing up their children - "even basic skills like managing budgets".

Mitchell's choice of Norman Tebbit (now Lord Tebbit, former Tory party chairman and Trade and Industry Secretary) as 'political hero', she knows might surprise some people. Famously remembered for telling the unemployed to "get on your bike" and find work, reviled by those on the left of the political spectrum, and regarded as somewhat of an anachronism by the modernisers in the Conservative party, he has, Mitchell thinks, often been misinterpreted. "He had a very logical way of thinking and wasn't scared of what others thought of him" she insists. He was no 'Tory grandee', she goes on, but from a very ordinary background who "made it on his own abilities" and "in his personal life had to overcome quite harrowing personal tragedy". He is, she feels, an example of a politician motivated by conviction and principle - "the greatest Prime Minister we never had".

This admiration does seem a little incongruous with Mitchell's own softly spoken manner. Closer to home, she drew inspiration from David Williamson, a former Tory councillor at Hamilton District Council who was something of a mentor to her during her time as the only Conservative at the Council.

When asked what can be done to re-engage the Scottish people with politics she sees work done at a local level as key, citing as an example the reaction to the proposed closure of Earnock High School in Hamilton. Two anti-closure candidates managed to overturn substantial Labour majorities to win council seats in a powerful campaign of opposition to the plans. She noticed how local people were energised by fighting an issue which they felt strongly was relevant to them and their community. Nevertheless, Mitchell has some concerns about independent candidates who she fears do not offer the voters breadth of issue coverage that party candidates can.

She hopes for a successful Scotland at ease with itself within the United Kingdom; there are "very many positive aspects which need to be emphasised" she says. In terms of the churches' role in Scottish political life, Mitchell believes there isn't sufficient recognition of their full potential. Although her own Christian faith is for her largely a private matter, she advocates a greater Christian focus in religious education in schools. It's a concern for her that children today learn about other cultures and faiths while many people are not all familiar with the Bible, and she would like to see the balance redressed.

To wind down from politics, she has recently taken up sailing, and plays golf - badly, she says. She also loves listening to music - particularly classical chillout music, which mixes classical music with more contemporary sounds. Current favourites are soundtracks from the Deer Hunter and Gallipoli, as well as the more contemporary Queen symphony.

As anti-social behaviour looks set to dominate the political agenda, a relaxing time is unlikely for Margaret Mitchell as the Tories' Deputy Justice spokesperson; perhaps the Justice 1 Committee is in for some tough talking in the Tebbit tradition.

