

## "Dalyell, Darcy and a desert island"

### Interview with MARY MULLIGAN, MSP for Linlithgow (Published November 2004)

It doesn't happen very often that a Minister has to resign from her position in order to defend the party line, yet that is why the very likeable Mary Mulligan resigned from her position as Deputy Communities Minister. The possible closure of St John's Hospital in Livingston has exercised many people in her Linlithgow constituency. She resigned not in order to join the campaign to keep it open but to explain honestly what the changing situation would mean for her constituents, to suggest to them that compromises would have to be made and perhaps some services could be provided at their local health centre rather than at St John's. But she "was worried that people would think she is saying that because she is a Minister, rather than I was saying it because I believed it and because I think it is important".

She enjoyed being a Minister, despite the fact it is an 'absolutely hectic' life. She was thankful that she had time to settle in as a backbench MSP first before being promoted as "I don't know what it must have been like for the poor souls who became Ministers straight away" after the 1999 election. When asked about the input in policy making between Ministers and civil servants, Mary said that a lot was dependent on the personal relationships between the two, as some civil servants were very determined and others were more open to negotiation.

As for getting beyond civil servants to reach out to others she commented that she always thought it was a terrible excuse for a Minister to say that the civil service had neglected to tell them about something: "I think if you are a Minister, it is your job to get out there and hear about it". She says that the whole point of a consultation is for Ministers to listen to all the arguments but "at the end of the day the Minister does have to make a decision and maybe not everybody will be happy about that, but I think people feel (if they are honest) they have been listened to". She feels, though, that Ministers and the Parliament generally has made huge strides in listening to others. At one point, she says, the Parliamentary Committees kept hearing evidence from a band of usual suspects but that they soon realised that and worked to go beyond them and to reach out to those who were not being listened to.

Mary imbibed politics with her dinner as her father was a strong trade unionist and politics was part of the dinner table conversation. From him she realised that people had an uphill battle to establish their rights and she felt that "it was important to have somebody from a working class background who was willing to take on the usual interests". She also believes that it is important that more women should get involved in politics and she decided that she had an obligation to practice what she preached. After university (where she had time to have a life - "unfortunately I have now given that up") she moved to Scotland and rejoined the Labour Party in 1983. By 1988 she was a councillor in Edinburgh and then she put herself forward for the Scottish Parliament.

As for being elected in 1999, "I think there is not very much professionally that would go beyond that first initial boost of having being elected". Linlithgow had been a Labour constituency for over 40 years with Tam Dalyell as the local MP but it was never a foregone conclusion that she would be elected as Tam had a lot of personal votes. But she was elected to the new Parliament: "a huge opportunity for anybody, but for somebody like myself it was just tremendous, actually being part of that; to feel people had placed their trust in you is alarming, but hopefully I can repay that in the work that I do for people". She really enjoys her job and thinks that it is an exciting and rewarding life being a politician even if it is challenging. But she believes that you have to take the job on for the right reasons as it is not the career to take if you want to be an important person. She gets frustrated when politicians don't listen to others and think that they have all the answers, displaying not only prejudice but also arrogance.

Tam Dalyell is still the constituency MP for Linlithgow and she finds working with him interesting, although he may not be "quite convinced that the Parliament here is a good idea";

Mary says he accepts that it is the will of the people, and the two politicians do work quite closely together because of their constituents and she appreciates his vast experience. She says that he keeps a close countenance on his own behaviour and will not comment on what is the responsibility of the Parliament. She thinks that "he still harbours the fear that it is the slippery slope to independence. I hope that it isn't. Obviously I hope that it has stopped us going down that route to independence and I hope people will appreciate that devolution is a good option for them and probably the best of both worlds".

Education is the policy area that really exercises Mary, it is always top of her list because she is passionate about everyone having the right to a good education. She thinks the ideal of comprehensive schools should be promoted because she believes that it is the best system. It worries her somewhat to see in places like Edinburgh that a significant number of children do not go their local school because their parents have opted to put them into private schools, which "removes the most advantaged children from our schools and stops them being fully comprehensive". Employment and health are the other two big issues for her and she thinks that for many in the Labour Party "the health service is an example of what we really mean about providing services for people at the point of need regardless of what your income might be". Mary holds to the belief that we are all equal and therefore we all deserve the same opportunities. Her Catholic beliefs also shape her belief in treating others the way she herself would like to be treated.

Because politicians and church people should all have the same aim of trying to make life better for people, they should work together to try and achieve this. She does wonder though if individual church people "think that their views are more important than everybody else's". She thinks that politicians should listen to what the churches have to say but that religious tolerance should be promoted, with churches having respect for each other despite doctrinal differences.

If for some inexplicable reason she got stranded on a desert island and she only had to take two people, Mary would take her husband John (they are still good friends despite everything!) and someone to make her laugh (John does make her laugh but for all the wrong reasons). Her luxury item would be a radio, not so she could listen to news and politics programmes but so she could listen to music. (She says she was a wayward Minister because she couldn't face listening to *Good Morning Scotland* on Radio Scotland in the mornings, she would just dip in and out of it). The one book she would take would be *Pride and Prejudice* because of her everlasting love of Mr Darcy. Mary's personal motto is to always look on the bright side of life and she has a great sense of humour, so it's got to be said she would make pretty good company herself on a desert island.

