

"I can't believe I get paid to do this job"

Interview with Murdo Fraser, Conservative MSP for Mid Scotland and Fife (Published March 2008)

Murdo Fraser faces many an uphill challenge. As Deputy Leader of the Scottish Conservatives he is trying to help the party come to terms with devolution, "which of course was not something we ever supported", and the disastrous situation it found itself in post 1997; "wiped out" in parliamentary terms in Scotland. He is also a keen munro bagger, having passed the half way point last year.

He believes, however, that the political landscape post 2007 is much more conducive to Conservative influence and success: "In terms of the situation we are now in with a minority SNP government I think we are demonstrating that we can actually get things done; we can work well with a minority government in a way that is much easier than was the case with the previous Labour/Liberal coalition". He hopes that constructive engagement with the SNP government will mean that the Conservatives can deliver some of their manifesto pledges, as happened in the additional funding for police numbers and the cutting of business rates in the Conservative-backed SNP budget.

Murdo Fraser got involved in politics when Margaret Thatcher was leader of his party, when she, according to Fraser, "transformed Britain generally for the better". She has been a major influence on him, alongside William Wilberforce, who wrestled with whether the church or politics was the best way to progress his social reforming agenda and demonstrated that often the political route is the right one for those who want to make important changes in society. He also cites Winston Churchill, drawing parallels both personally and for his party with a man who was a "voice in the wilderness and deeply out of fashion" for most of his career until he led the country during the Second World War and has since been voted the greatest ever Briton.

The poster on his office wall of Margaret Thatcher with the slogans, "Join the Resistance, Fight for Freedom," is one of many insights into his motivations and influences. He explains: "Philosophically and ideologically I am a Conservative. I believe in individual liberty, I believe in smaller government and think society works better without politicians trying to tell everyone what to do... I believe society works best where people are given freedom to live their own lives without too much interference from the Government whether it's in terms of levels of taxation or whether it's in terms of social policy."

There are of course several areas where he believes new laws and support from the Government is needed. He has recently introduced a Member's Bill proposal to bring in an extra safeguard against the closure of rural schools. In the last 8 years, 71 rural schools have closed and he has two main arguments why this has to be resisted. "Educationally rural schools do provide a high standard of education", but there is also a wider issue at stake. Often when rural communities have lost its local shop, its bank, its post office, "the school acts as the last joint community asset that exists" and so to lose this as well, "adds to that spiral of decline of the vibrancy of rural communities".

Rural issues are very close to his heart, stemming from his upbringing in rural Scotland and having family members who are in farming: "how to protect the rural communities, how to ensure the rural economy is vibrant, is very much at the core of what I stand for". He has spoken about the need to "preserve God's earth" and believes there is great potential to link this with support for our rural communities, "I think there is a real win-win opportunity in terms of reducing food miles if we can try and tweak the current public sector procurement rules to encourage more sourcing of local food and home produced produce".

Although the area of climate change and the environment also comes down to personal responsibility, he argues that the Government should be directing policy at incentives for people to behave in responsible ways, such as a more generous grant scheme for people who want to

invest in energy efficiency in their homes.

There are many pieces of legislation that he believes are unnecessary, but, if given the opportunity to scrap one piece he would choose the ban on fox hunting; as he explains, "it was motivated by ignorance and bigotry in the main from people who didn't understand the issues and had no concept of life in rural Scotland".

Rural schools act as a link to the other subject that is close to his heart and on which he represents his party - education. There are three areas on which he wants to see progress: discipline in schools; vocational training; and more flexibility in terms of schools offering school specialisms.

"We are still living with the misguided legacy of the last administration of reducing school exclusions. Persistent troublemakers who should have been excluded weren't and the indiscipline rates soared." The right to appeal against exclusion should be removed with the final say being left with headteachers and "second chance centres" should be developed, where persistent offenders could be put together and be given more intense support.

On vocational training, he explains, "We think there are youngsters who will never excel academically but where, given the option to go down the more vocational route, they would actually be much more engaged in the school system and end up leaving school at 16 or whatever age much better equipped for the workplace than they currently are and with much better life prospects than is currently the case".

He is also the chairman of the Scottish Conservatives and Churches Forum which exists "to help inform our internal policy making as to the views of the Churches community" and thinks that the churches have a really important role to play in politics, although he thinks we have to be wary as he doesn't want to see politics in Scotland going down the same route as the US where some churches are very closely aligned to one political party.

"I think there are divergent views amongst Christians as there are amongst any other section of society. You can be a Christian and a Conservative; you can be a Christian and a Liberal; or a Nationalist or a Socialist or whatever - You can have any political view and I think still quite comfortably reconcile that with Christianity. I think that's the way it should be...What is the correct Christian viewpoint on levels of income tax, what is the correct Christian viewpoint on which road should we be building? It seems to me that you cannot have an exclusively Christian viewpoint on every political issue."

He heaps praise on the contribution Churches make to inclusion and cohesion in society, fulfilling needs that are not being met by the state, citing the work of Crossreach and the Bethany Trust. It is "absolutely right that churches should stand up and say this is what we believe and we will take a stand on what we believe."

Scotland is a multicultural and multifaith country and Fraser believes it is generally free from racial and sectarian tensions (though he is a Rangers supporter). "My experience living in the East of Scotland is that sectarianism is almost like a different country. Most of Scotland would say that sectarianism seems entirely alien."

What he loves most about his job is debating, "Sometimes I come back to the office and I say to my staff, I can't believe I get paid to do this job."

