

"We need to break the psychological link between growth and happiness"
Interview with Patrick Harvie, Green Party List MSP for Glasgow
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When Patrick Harvie is asked what issue is closest to his heart, the answer "climate change", may not come as a huge surprise. However, Harvie clarifies, "what I'm interested in doing is getting beyond those single issues like climate change or oil depletion or depletion of the fish stocks or whatever these environmental themes are and look at what's underlying it. What's underlying it is selfish, shallow, consumerist me-me-me culture and it's been very deliberately constructed to fuel economic growth in the second half of the twentieth century and it's still going on. That's what's at the heart of the ecological damage and also the social harm and unhappiness that we see around us. It's hard that kind of message to get across in populist terms, in public terms, but it's necessary to start getting underneath some of these incredibly pressing issues that threaten the future of human society and the economy and civilisation as well as the world around us."

This approach - to dig deeper and find inter-connected solutions to difficult problems - is reflected in Harvie's approach to his role as Convener of the Scottish Parliament's Transport, Infrastructure and Climate Change Committee: "What I think we need to do constructively is think about what kind of transport system can we have and what do we want for the 21st century ... one that doesn't buy into the idea that just moving around more is good for the economy. Economists conventionally have had this almost psychological connection between burning oil and economic growth; we need to break that link just as much as we need to break the psychological link between growth and happiness."

Of course, the Climate Change Bill is also under Harvie's Committee's remit, and he identifies this not only as, "a chunk of work", but work that is "time critical". "Lives are already being lost because of climate change and the longer we delay making the cuts the deeper the subsequent cuts have to be if we are going to save accumulatively the amount of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases that we need to. So there's got to be sense of urgency."

He argues that we need a clear programme of action that says how are we going to do this, what are we going to do differently which will reduce our emissions? He is not interested in offsetting because "the world cannot pay somebody else to reduce emissions; we have to actually live differently and run our economies differently."

Patrick Harvie believes that the current balance of the Scottish Parliament may work in favour of a stronger Bill: "I think minority government has been very healthy. So we need to use the fact that we are in a period of minority administration creatively and if we can do that there is a chance we can get a Bill that is braver than a civil servant might advise a Minister to do."

His views on the benefits of minority Government do not necessarily extend to support for particular SNP policies. Greens don't support the local income tax because they see it as less fair than proper income tax, ending up with very, very wealthy people paying nothing at all. Their proposal is for land value tax.

Obviously they are in a minority position advocating that but "in a tightly balanced Parliament between those who support council tax and those who support local income tax, we can argue for an element of land value tax which will be re-distributed from the kind of individuals or companies that have land banks and simply seek to manipulate the system to their own advantage and it will benefit disproportionately those who don't have much assets". Harvie sees it as important for an asset wealth element to be included in the tax mix; otherwise "we are just going to benefit those who can employ accountants to shift their wealth from income to assets".

When thinking about the most effective routes to tackle poverty, Harvie believes that reserved issues come into play. "Our principal approach is to simplify a lot of the tax and benefits system. We have a policy called Citizen's Income, which is a universal income paid to everybody as a right." Tax people pay on any earnings above that would be higher and so it becomes redistributive, with high earners (like MSPs) paying quite a bit more but crucially while "people who

earn a little, people who are far in their own lives from the position where they can just go out and get a full-time job, people who maybe need to take it slowly, people who need to combine working with education or caring - they wouldn't lose out, they wouldn't lose their citizens income so you abolish completely the poverty trap and the situation of people losing benefits because of taking on work".

That's particularly important in relation to parents and young parents who (he says) very often feel pressured, and if they are coming from being on benefits, almost literally forced to take on work that they may not feel they are ready for "whether it's mothers of fathers - totally gender neutral - the relationship between parents and young children is crucially important for this generation and I think we are effectively selling that at the moment if we are forcing those people to become so called economically active". He strongly believes that there are other forms of activity more valuable to society than economic activity in the labour market: "We need to recognise that people's freedom to be parents when their children are young is hugely important to society, more important than more economic growth."

Patrick Harvie's own Members Bill, that will allow Scotland's courts to impose tougher sentences for offences aggravated by the victim's disability, gender identity or sexual orientation, will, he hopes, be law by 2009. He is optimistic that the Bill will see little opposition once people understand what is being proposed: "Those who do have a problem with homosexuality or transgender people continually say they oppose hate crimes as well, they don't want people to be targeting individuals with criminal offences whether that's violence or harassment or anything else and so I think they should be able to welcome a proposal that tackles that and is about applying appropriate sentences."

When asked about the role of the churches in politics, Harvie finds that "a tricky one ... as a secularist I think society would be better off if all religious worldviews including atheism and humanism were on a par, on a level playing field; at the moment they're not."

However, he goes on to say that he wouldn't want that to be taken as meaning that the churches or anybody else shouldn't play a part in politics: "They always have done - the Church of Scotland in particular; the history of its development is in with the bricks with the history of the development of modern democracy and that's something they should be very proud of and Scotland should be very proud of; even as an atheist I am proud of that part of Scottish history. To imagine that they shouldn't play a part in politics locally or globally would be absurd.

That, he says, needs to be a constructive part; just as environmentalists sometimes finger wag at people and come over as a hectoring, lecturing attitude about how people are supposed to live, sometimes people in the religious hierarchy do that in a way that he thinks a lot of their followers are uncomfortable with, whether that's about sexuality or about anything else.

When asked what individuals can do to counter climate change, Harvie is initially cautious about politicians saying "here's how you should live your life": "we need to be empowering and give people opportunities". Practical steps that people can take start with coming together as a community, "to try and create the kind of community cohesion and community cooperation that can result in far bigger reductions in emissions than we can make in our own individual life". There are things like going on fewer foreign holidays and switching things off but people "don't need to be told that by politicians". "Creating a community involvement is the first thing that people can do - to make the first step in that direction by knocking on the neighbour's door or whatever or taking part in a community group, or with a religious organisation; eco-congregations are starting to come up and say what they can do".

