

**"I read history books like other people read romantic novels"**  
**Interview with Robert Brown MSP, Liberal Democrat Member for Glasgow**  
**(published May 2009)**

Robert Brown always wanted to be a politician. He was interested in politics at school and joined the Liberal Society at Aberdeen University in 1965 filled with the sense that he was in life to do something. His choice of the Liberal Party over others was for a number of reasons, "The Liberal Party had a youthful, radical feeling about it, a change the world sense, an idealism." He describes this hopefulness and inspiration as permeating his formative years; the 60s and flower power, the Kennedys, the Beatles; "that general feeling that you could just change the world."

The attractive Liberal candidates of the time also helped; Jo Crimmond was the leader and Jim Davidson was his local member; a man who his dad said could put his CV on every tree in West Aberdeenshire and everyone would vote for him (he was a decorated war hero, a naval guy, a spy, a local farmer...). He goes on, "I was always attracted by the Great Liberal Government of 1906; Lloyd George, Asquith, Campbell-Bannerman, going back to Gladstone, and Beveridge and Keynes more recently."

The very strong youth movement in the Liberal Party echoed the spirit of protest and optimism that was going on around the world at that time, in response to the Vietnam War for example and this belief in progress and the ability of people to change things pervades his politics and personality. When asked for one piece of advice, he offers, "take an optimistic and a hopeful view about life - there are a lot of very good things about life and you can concentrate on all the dreadful things that happen or you can devote your energies to trying to make things better and to have a belief that if life is about anything it's about progress and improving things and having a contribution to make in a personal and a social sense"

During the Thatcher era, he detected a narrower, "first after me kind of attitude" but has seen a change in recent years and believes in the younger generation now you've "got some very talented and generous people who I think will do great things in the world". Issues around young people are key for him and central to almost everything else, he argues, is the issue of opportunity for young people. There are about 35,000 young people in Scotland who have "horrible starts" and "have extraordinary difficulty in achieving their potential in the world. It's a horrendous loss to them, it's a huge loss to the economy and the fabric of society and the country and frankly we ought to bend every rule as it were to make them have a better chance in life." The numbers are manageable he believes but there is still a need to find solutions that work.

Currently the Lib Dem spokesperson for Justice, he talks about how important early intervention is to break the cycles of deprivation and criminality. "The longer I'm in it the more I realise, partly from having had the education portfolio before, that you can't just isolate off prisoners, the court system, people who get into some sort of trouble as some sort of errant group. They are in a sense failures of other things that have happened in society."

"You can solve a lot of issues to do with criminal behaviour by tackling issues to do with parenting, to do with family and deprivation." He sees that so often "those children who appear before the children's panel at 4 or 5, 6 in need of care and protection because of problems with parenting, be it abuse or drug and alcohol addiction are those who come back before the courts at 16, 17, 18 for criminal behaviour. And it's not particularly surprising when you think about what causes people to be alienated, angry, that's got to do with bonding, that's got to do with parental issues, literacy and numeracy, mental health problems and the frustrations all that causes." Employment issues are important as well he argues, "If you can't

get a job then you have a sense of rejection; if you don't have skills to offer the whole thing must be terribly frustrating."

Youth organisations make a "huge difference to what people's opportunities and attitudes to life are" and he praises the work of youth organisations like the Scouts, the Boys Brigade and the Guides in offering opportunities to young people. As part of the Lab/Lib Dem administration he was Deputy Minister for Children and Young People and sees the Youth Work Strategy that administration introduced as being particularly significant in terms of channeling resources to youth organisations; if he'd had longer he would really have liked to develop that agenda. He explained, "It won't be written on the history books but what it did do was to give focussed help to the head offices of youth organisations for training, and expanding the volunteers and leaders they could get and for facilities in local areas."

His support for voluntary organisations is strong and he is particularly involved in Citizens Advice, an organisation he believes has always been underfunded, "operated on a shoestring". National support for these kind of organisations should be better as although some councils are better than others, "across the piece I don't think they have been recognised as they should have been."

"The churches are inspirers"; this is evident in the people involved in voluntary organisations and the motivation that drives people to be involved he believes. "I think if you took away the church, or imagined Scotland without the churches it would be considerably poorer, both in terms of physical bodies doing things and the inspiration that lies behind it." He puts a qualification on this though and warns against people thrusting "their religious views down other people's throats", for example on issues such as abortion or religion in schools. Having said that, he does think there is a place for religion in schools and supports the direction of travel seen through the developments in religious observance in recent years saying, "I think our tradition has been one of managing the two without the extremes we've seen in other countries."

Although he always wanted to be a politician and has stood in most elections since 1974 it wasn't until the advent of the "fair voting system" in the Scottish Parliament that he had the opportunity to be elected at Parliamentary level. Having trained as a lawyer and been a depute Procurator Fiscal it wasn't too big a switch to go from interpreting the laws to making the laws.

If Brown could introduce just one piece of legislation it would be something that "guarantees to every young person the fullest opportunity to develop their talents" and although he realises this is something that sounds difficult to do with legislation he thinks it would make the most difference. A smaller thing that he would like to introduce new legislation on is the law of common good. This is the property, like botanic gardens, that each local authority owns that has come down through generations. "In some instances it's quite substantial and other instances it's rather small but the councils quite often treat land like that and land that has been given to it by donors (like parks in Glasgow) as if it was land like any other and I think it needs greater protection against people selling off chunks of and putting night clubs in the middle of it for example."

Outside of politics his big passion is history he explains, "The whole idea of where societies come from, how they rise and fall, the great deeds that people have done, the changes that we've made - I think there are a lot of lessons to learn from these kind of things. I read history books like other people read romantic novels or something." Oh and also, "In a minor sort of way I am also addicted to Newcastle United - the football team with the biggest support and the least success in modern times of any football team."

