

**"there's good guys and bad guys out there - and I want to be on the side of the good guys"
Robin Harper MSP, Green Party, Lothians - published June 2009**

The first Green MSP in the Scottish Parliament, Robin Harper has been involved in the Parliament since the beginning. However, his own political career did not begin in Green politics. He has been politically engaged for as long as he can remember, but his early years were spent in the Liberals, as secretary of the university Liberal Club. He almost stood for election for the Liberals during this period, thwarted only by the overlap between the campaign period and his exam timetable. However at the beginning of his teaching career as a History and Modern Studies teacher, he felt that not belonging to a political party was of benefit to him in terms of objectivity. An "issue voter", he has voted for both Labour and Liberal candidates over the years, and although he doesn't recall ever voting Conservative, he "certainly would have if the Conservative had been the best candidate."

Inspired by Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring" which he read in the early 1970s, Robin developed a keen concern for the environment. He became involved in the production of a short film with students at Edinburgh University for which he provided the music and it was, in fact, his musical connections which later drew him closer to reconciling his interests in politics and the environment. Following a chance encounter in 1985 with a former guitar pupil (now a professor of Environmental Studies at Kingston University, Jamaica) who gave him a pamphlet for the fledgling Green Party, Robin realised that a connection between the environment and politics was possible. However, he just tucked the pamphlet away in his pocket, next to the leaflets he had been carrying around for Friends of the Earth Scotland and Greenpeace.

Robin vividly remembers the turning point for him. Whilst on holiday in Germany in July later that year, news broke of the sinking of the Greenpeace ship "Rainbow Warrior" at Auckland, New Zealand. He remembers thinking, "there's good guys and bad guys out there - and I want to be on the side of the good guys". Immediately sending off all three application forms, the Green Party was the first to respond and he went along to an Edinburgh meeting. A self-confessed "bit of an organiser", Robin was asked at his first meeting whether he would be willing to head up the Edinburgh branch, and the rest is history!

Displaying a level of involvement in Cross Party Groups far surpassing the average MSP, Robin is quick to clarify he does not have a large role in all 26 cross-party groups of which he is a member, although he is deputy convenor or convenor of seven groups. Despite this modesty, his enthusiasm particularly for issues relating to the environment and children and young people shines through.

When asked how his previous jobs have influenced his career as an MSP, the connections are obvious. A brief spell as an actor in his early years proved invaluable to his future career plans, and he credits this time as crucial in helping him develop a confident public presence and skills "to work the audiences".

His long career as a teacher permeates his political interests. A passion to "do more for young people" comes through strongly at several points during the interview. When asked about the UK and Scottish Governments' commitments to eradicating child poverty, Robin is keen to stress that his definition of "poverty" goes beyond the narrowly defined monetary and material definitions used to benchmark current child poverty targets: "Deprivation in other ways, in terms of play, music... poverty of ambition, poverty of wellbeing in the wider sense" are all areas in which he believes the lives of children must be improved. Which is why, when asked what legislation he would pass if he had one wish, Robin recognises that his "raft of legislation" providing the range of opportunities to

counteract this wider definition of "poverty" and to ensuring that every child is given the care, love, and attention it deserves would be ambitious, but vital.

A member of the Scottish Episcopal Church, Robin was brought up in the Church of England and now describes himself as "happily ecumenical". He has, however, a pragmatic attitude towards the relationship between his faith and politics; he clearly values his personal faith, but identifies a potentially "dangerous" reluctance within churches to debate and consider other viewpoints. Citing the openness of debate seen in the Early Church, he expressed his concern about the perceived reluctance within churches to debate and change themselves, so while he embraces the role played by churches in the political sphere, he emphasises a need for politicians to be able to sit down with those of all faiths and none, and to be prepared to engage actively in moral discussions. Robin's personal faith is firmly based on the premise that living out ones beliefs involves a responsibility in the present. Referring to the famous speech in Shakespeare's "Julius Caesar" in which the character of Mark Antony asserts that:

"The evil that men do lives after them; / The good is oft interred with their bones";

Robin is not so sure. The life one leads now, he believes, is the legacy left for others; and therefore he believes it is "much more important to behave responsibly now" to leave a positive and lasting legacy, rather than focusing on living for life after death.

It is clear that he does not shy away from discussing issues which others would consider controversial. Having struggled briefly with depression during his university career, he is all too aware of the stigma of mental health, seeing it as the last 'big issue' that nobody wants to discuss. During his spells as Rector of Aberdeen and Edinburgh universities, he was always keen to mention mental health in all of his public addresses to students, encouraging them to have "a positive attitude to mental health" despite what others may have thought about exposing young students to an issue considered taboo in Scottish society.

His focus on the importance of discussion and debate is clear when asked about his opinion on two issues currently on the political horizon at Holyrood: same-sex marriage and assisted dying. His response to questions about both of these subjects is almost identical: "It is vital that this is debated".

As a significant plank in the Greens' policy, it is unsurprising that Robin speaks passionately about the subject of climate change and environmental responsibility; but this passion is not translated into unqualified enthusiasm for the forthcoming Climate Change (Scotland) Bill, currently making its way through the Parliament. That the provisions of the Bill are written down is "neither here nor there", and although it would be wonderful for Scotland to boast of the most comprehensive climate change legislation in the world, this will be irrelevant if the provisions aren't translated into action. It is of deep concern and regret that he sees no evidence of either Government at Holyrood or Westminster placing climate change at the centre of all of their policies which is where he argues it needs to be for real action to be taken to tackle the problem.

"Perseverance. If you've got something you want to do, never give up". These were Robin Harper's words of advice he would like to pass on to others, and his own experiences certainly seem to reflect a sense of commitment, passion and endurance. From his early years as a long distance runner, "I didn't win many races but I enjoyed running; but it's that attitude of getting your head down and just pushing as hard as you can", to finally winning a seat in the first Scottish Parliament after 11 failed attempts at election; Robin Harper is justified when he says "I can look back with satisfaction".

