

**"In poverty there is no liberty"**  
**Interview with Ross Finnie, Liberal Democrat MSP for West of Scotland**  
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Three weeks after being elected as an MSP, Ross Finnie found himself in government, and was one of only two ministers who served in government for the whole of the first 8 years of the Scottish Parliament. When asked in the early days if it had been a steep learning curve, he replied, "No... it's been a learning perpendicular!" He also, uniquely, kept the same position during these 8 years, as Minister for Rural Development (and latterly Environmental Affairs), being responsible for the first ever agriculture strategy and first ever marine strategy covering fishing and conservation of the seas. These are among the things he cites as his main achievements during this time, alongside the creation of Scottish Water and the passing of the Land Reform Bill. More generally he was proud to be part of a government that was about being more accessible and engaged with the individuals for whom he had policy responsibility.

He has been interested and involved in politics since his school days, serving as a councillor for 22 years and standing for Westminster twice before being elected as an MSP. Since May he has found himself in a new political role, being a backbench MSP, and, as he described it, "a constructive critic of Government". So why didn't the Lib Dems want to stay in power and form a coalition with the new largest party, the SNP? Finnie believes that what a country needs is stability in government, and that that stability could not have been delivered with two parties who have such different views on constitutional arrangements.

"I don't define my nationality by boundaries - I define my nationality by my Scottish history, my Scottish culture, my Scottish background, my Scottish education, my Scottish legal system, my Scottish religion - these are the things that define my nationality and liberals don't believe in nationalism per se, so it is a pretty fundamental difference between the two parties."

So what are the issues that are closest to his heart? As you might expect, liberty and particularly individual liberty is absolutely fundamental to him as a Liberal Democrat. "It is about communities, it is about the individuals, it's about individual progress, it's about freedoms - I'm a staunch liberal so for me it is about individual liberty. In poverty there is no liberty, in ill health there is no liberty, so these things are pretty fundamental to me."

Focussing on individuals comes across very strongly and his passion for individual liberty is also, he believes, the key to unlocking the huge inequality gaps in Scotland. He's obviously disturbed and perplexed as to why investment and good intentions from different politicians have not been successful enough in closing inequality gaps and ending deprivation. "I'm not sure we have taken those policies intended to close the health inequalities, intended to close financial inequalities, to close deprivation gaps, that we've really made the connection with what is it that is actually part of the individuals problem. We need to do more to recognise that if we get the solution to the individual right then we are more likely to get the solution to the wider community."

He is keen to emphasise the separation of religion and politics and explains that this focus on liberty and the policy options that result come from his philosophical underpinning derived from his political party and is separate, but not incompatible with his theological underpinning that comes from his religion. To illustrate this he shares how he was invited to speak at an event under the title, "The political Jesus"; his assessment was, "of course Christ was not a politician and should never be thought of as such".

So what role does he think the churches should play in politics? "I liked the title, Church and Nation.<sup>1</sup> I didn't just enjoy my 5 or 6 years on that committee I also thought it was a nice way of expressing the view that the church has a different role to play but it has an integral and important part to play in the health and well-being of the nation. Clearly it has to stand well back from party politics but it should be both an inspiration and a critic of what goes on in society."

Turning again to his ministerial role at Rural Affairs he stresses how important it is that people across Scotland understand and appreciate what a valuable natural resource our rural areas are. At the moment it is undervalued, not because people want to undervalue it but because, "we have allowed a couple of generations to come through with no appreciation of what it does and what it contributes, what it means to the fabric of Scottish society... In today's highly commercialised society particularly in the procurement of food, where we dive into a supermarket, we shovel things off the shelf into our shopping basket, we've no idea of where it came from, how it got there and what's in it."

The question that gets the most animated response is about human rights and civil liberties. He is extremely concerned that civil rights and civil liberties are rather alarmingly being "salami sliced" and stresses that there is a need to be constantly vigilant and alert both domestically and internationally. We must address why people are becoming disaffected and susceptible to turning their backs on civil liberties rather than spending day upon day having this false debate on locking people up under suspicion of terrorism - a proposal that, he says, has not been supported by "one shred of evidence!"

Increasingly, Finnie thinks the UK's approach to international security is all wrong and thinks all sorts of questions need to be asked to find ways to refocus foreign policy on trying to address increasing inequalities internationally. This is obviously an area that he is increasingly interested in and focusing energy on but at this point there is one thing he is absolutely certain of, "if we are going to improve the state of peace and order in the world we don't achieve it by breaking down civil liberties in our own countries."

From a passionate response about politics I ask what is his biggest passion outside politics. His wife of course he replies! And his two children, who have been very supportive of his "quite eccentric engagement in politics". He is also very keen on sport and can still be found in winter getting thoroughly wet watching his local rugby club.

Another refreshing response to the final question follows. What is the best piece of advice that you could pass on to someone else? "Always think of others - don't think of yourself". He says "we can all get very caught up in our own agendas, caught up in what we believe is terribly important", but it's a big world out there with lots of talent and diversity. As a younger politician at school he was much taken by that oft-used quote in John F Kennedy's inaugural speech in 1960: "Think not of what America can do for you but what you can do for America." This sentiment can be applied to many a situation he concludes.

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<sup>1</sup> Ross Finnie was a member of the Church of Scotland's Church and Nation Committee for 5 years.

