

## **"Hard pressed not to be Labour"**

**Sarah Metcalfe, Director of Research and Strategy for the Labour Resource Centre in the Scottish Parliament (published January 2009)**

In a departure from our usual pattern of interviews with MSPs and MPs, our interview this month is with Sarah Metcalfe, Director of Research and Strategy for the Labour Resource Centre in the Scottish Parliament.

As a child, Sarah Metcalfe wanted to be an actress, but like Alex Fergusson, Gordon Brown and David Steel, she is a child of the manse, a species which appear to find themselves inexorably drawn towards the political sphere. Her own experience has been that children of clergy are all over politics, and she keeps finding more of them, not just MSPs and MPs, but at all levels of political life.

It's a phenomenon that interests her and she has a few ideas to try to understand and explain it. Party politics, Sarah believes, has a lot of similar characteristics to church life; the loyalty, the community and the often broad range of views formulated into one coherent position. Then there's the obvious, more ideological commonality; the passion and desire to change society and make the world a better place for everyone.

She has another interesting theory - she sees that her parents and older generations felt that the church was the place and the vehicle through which they could and should channel their energies to live out their Christian values and work towards their gospel visions. Many of those in her generation don't see the church as the place they can make this impact or where their skills can be most utilised, instead politics is one of the vehicles in which they can affect change and live out those same Christian values.

The churches do have an important role to play in politics, she believes, particularly where they can share their experience from the communities they are part of. The churches have, Sarah feels, an important perspective to contribute where they live among people and respond and react to their lives.

Not only does she credit her upbringing and her parents' distinct Christian values for motivating her to work in politics, she also attributes her particular party affiliation to her childhood experiences. She grew up in Castlemilk, one of Glasgow's big peripheral housing schemes, after her father, the former moderator of the Church of Scotland John Miller, was called to be the minister in Castlemilk East Parish Church.

When asked how her upbringing has influenced her politics, she puts it very simply, "I'd be hard pressed not to be Labour". It's why she's in the Labour Party. She and her classmates were at the sharp end of the vast inequalities in Scotland today, the lack of opportunities and the pervasive lack of ambition or hopes for her community.

Sarah had been thinking about joining the Labour Party for a long time and signed up in 1991 after she saw an advert in the paper. She is now the Director of Research and Strategy for the Labour Group in the Scottish Parliament, a very busy and demanding job in which no two days are ever the same.

She heads a team of researchers and press officers who support the Labour MSPs on issues from crofting to crime, education to the economy, both in preparing briefings and in dealing with the media. Sarah is well qualified for the job having managed and supported the Party's policy forum to prepare the manifesto for the 2003 Scottish Parliament

elections. She also gained valuable Westminster experience having worked for the Party in London on elections communications at the time of the 2005 general election.

The devolution settlement is quite clear so in many ways there is not a lot of crossover with her counterparts at Westminster she says. There is of course a wider Labour message and, Sarah points out, it is good to see what is happening in policy initiatives in England and Wales, to foster a cross fertilisation of ideas and to pool experience. Sharing experience and the practical outcomes of policy decisions in England and Wales also helps the Labour Resource Centre to keep a check on how different policies are working and enables them to see if Scottish people are missing out on initiatives that have proved successful south of the border.

When asked whether she would ever consider running for elected office, she is very clear that at the moment she is focused on what she is doing, and is enjoying her current work. And while never say never, she is enjoying her back room responsibility supporting the Labour MSPs in developing their role in opposition.

Being in opposition took a bit of adjusting for the Party she admits, but in recent months they have developed into the role. With Iain Gray's leadership they have settled and started to ask the right questions to be an effective opposition.

The SNP had a protracted honeymoon and had hit the ground running but there has been a definite shift in their fortunes over the last 9 months. The economic mantras, particularly their focus on the "arc of prosperity" countries including Iceland, have been undermined by the financial crisis and their ideas, Sarah believes, have been found wanting, with the realities of their rhetoric now coming home to roost.

Questions are now being asked by the media and wider society, and by a stronger and more effective opposition. "It's a serious time and there is a need to see how we can all work together to keep on going - we need to think about and look at the big picture."

Closest to her heart are issues of poverty and work, with the global financial meltdown being the largest current single issue on the political agenda. She is deeply concerned about the cuts that she sees now coming into effect as a result of the local government concordat, introduced by the SNP, in education and in the voluntary sector. The key role of her unit and the wider party just now, Sarah explains, is scrutinising the impact of the Government's policies and asking the question, "What are their promises and are they sticking to them?"

The best thing about her job is working in the Scottish Parliament, it's a "total privilege". On the flip side however, the worst thing is being in opposition and seeing decisions having a bad impact on Scotland.

The best piece of advice she would pass on to someone else is practical and specific, "Give up smoking - it's hard but once you've done that you can do anything."

