

Interview with Susan Deacon, Labour MSP for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh, who has had experience of Ministerial office (as Health and Community Care Minister) as well as life as a backbench MSP. (Published June 2003)

"A few less Nike trainers and Sony playstations and a few more cuddles"

Susan Deacon's interest in politics stretches as far back as she can remember. "I think they'll identify a gene one day!" she laughs. Influenced by her father, although not *party* political, she grew up believing change was possible: "I've always had a strong sense of seeing things that made me angry ... the potential of making things better and wanting to do something about it". She joined the Labour Party aged 17, soon after Mrs Thatcher became Prime Minister. "That was a real defining period for us as individuals and for the country as a whole" she says; "there was a big sense that a lot of things people had fought long and hard for were under threat".

The individualism of the Thatcher years has left an indelible impression on Deacon's politics and, while she sees progress, she admits there is still a long way to go to build a "modern manifestation of collectivism *within* families and communities". She stresses this doesn't mean turning the clock back, but finding new ways of working with changes in society - such as greater numbers of lone parent families, families where both parents work, fewer extended family networks. "People lead much more individualistic lifestyles rather than going out to the back green together, blethering", she reflects. Working in public services has given her a conviction that they should be "rooted" in a certain "ethos and values", not simply viewed in managerial terms.

Apartheid formed a backdrop to developing her political beliefs and addressing injustice still underpins her politics. Nelson Mandela is a one of her heroes, and she regards as "nonsense" our politicians being considered as doing things that are brave. "Brave politicians are people like Mandela who have put their life and their freedom on the line - in his case for 26 years - because he believed in something," she says; "if we applied a minuscule bit of that commitment, passion and principle in our politics we could go a long way towards re-engaging people". The late Labour cabinet minister Barbara Castle, she admires for "until her dying day ... calling a spade a shovel and taking the establishment to task". The former SDLP leader John Hume is an inspiration for helping bring about the Northern Ireland peace process "often at enormous personal risk to him and his family, out of an innate belief that it was the right thing to do".

The discussion turns to "new politics" where the committees are frequently cited as being the best part of co-operative working. "Yes, there are some very good examples of that" she acknowledges, but "the last four years is littered with examples, of politicians within committees reverting to type". She notes that all sorts of pressures - both within political parties and outside - heighten adversarialism in Scottish politics; "there are still people wanting to score capital at one another's expense". Her message seems to be that progress has been made, but "let's not get carried away".

She rejects notions of widespread apathy among the electorate, declaring; "I do not believe that just because people don't vote they don't care". The fact that so few turned out at the polls, she believes, reflects more abstention than apathy. She points to declining voter turnout across Western democracies and the myth of a "halcyon era where people all went to the polls". The MSP for Edinburgh East sees Scotland - with its new institutions and emerging multi-party system - as uniquely placed to re-engage people with politics. Rather than interacting directly with parliamentary processes most people simply want a parliament that is relevant to them and MSPs who are accessible both in the way they work and the language they use.

Sitting through a parliamentary committee meeting is not a priority for most people, she acknowledges. People should expect to see their MSP working with them in their communities, and to access them on issues that affect them - whether it's benefit problems, getting their child an operation, or setting up a local food co-op or tenants group. "The challenge is for us to spend less time working with civic society in terms of us talking to each other and more time working with organisations like Civic Forum, the churches and others in thinking about how we collectively turn outwards more and make the process more relevant to a wider range of people" she says; "but let's not substitute process for practice".

The way that young people in particular, engaged with the issue of war in Iraq - which Deacon spoke out against - strikes her as encouraging, as does the interest in issues such as the environment. She views it as the responsibility of politicians to engage openly with the anxieties and dilemmas that young people have and "not just to fob them off with what frankly smacks often of just being the stock response and soundbite of the party line".

While no longer an active churchgoer or a "particularly religious person", she sees a vital role for the church in building a fairer Scotland. "The value base of the major faiths is very sound - we could do with that anchored in our politics" she says, reflecting on the "enormously influential role" of the church in speaking out in defence of disadvantaged communities during the 1980s. An opportunity exists, she believes, to stimulate debate on issues that the confines of political parties make difficult to address. "We'll not always be in agreement but it's another positive stimulus", she adds.

When asked why she's supporting Labour colleague Jackie Baillie's proposed Bill to reform charity law, she seems surprised by the media attention generated. Communities Minister Margaret Curran has promised an Executive Bill to address the issue, yet Baillie - Curran's predecessor in the then Social Justice portfolio - has lodged her own backbench proposals. Deacon rejects the idea that the move marks some form of challenge to the Executive: "it's more a matter of *when* rather than *if*... so if the Executive can make progress better or faster, that's fine", she insists.

Parenthood has changed Deacon greatly and she makes no apologies about her two children being the most important thing in her life. The influence is felt most keenly on family and community issues. Alongside addressing services, Deacon argues, it's equally important to address how parents and families are supported and how we make our youngsters feel valued. "When you see these wee bundles and you realise how early in life they start to be shaped - it's terrifying how much you say and do influences their development from a very early stage ... the world of parenthood changes your outlook immeasurably".

"I would like us to have more of a people and human focus ... modern politics has become bound up in technospeak" adds the former Health Minister. Economic growth is important, she acknowledges, but people working in their communities, and caring for children or elderly parents contribute as much to the health and wellbeing of our society - and even our economy. She regrets how society measures people in terms of male success patterns - "what rung of the ladder are you on, what's your salary, where do you live, what qualifications have you got" - advocating a rethink of some of the excesses of consumerism and the long hours work culture. "I suppose my vision is a Scotland that is fair and more just and places more value on people" she says. "We could probably do with a few less Nike trainers and Sony playstations and a few more cuddles."

