

**"There is no bible that you read that is about keeping your hands clean
from the difficult and challenging issues"**

**Interview with Wendy Alexander, MSP for Paisley North and leader of the Labour Party in the
Scottish Parliament (Published November 2007)**

Over the last few months, much has been said in the press about Wendy Alexander's leadership style so we met up with the new Leader of Labour in the Scottish Parliament to chat about the substance behind the acres of column inches.

In a recent speech to the Scottish Council Foundation, Alexander was quoted as saying that she 'knows the sort of country she wants to bequeath to her children.' But what would that country look like? "I want to see a healthier, fairer, happier country"; a country that is more neighbourly, aspirational, ambitious and compassionate. From here she goes straight on to describe some of the greatest scars on our society: our health record; unreasonable levels of poverty; and - an issue that permeates our discussions - how we care for the most vulnerable in our society. Immediately it's clear that she's a thinker, that she is scandalised by injustice and that she is committed to the challenge ahead of the Parliament to formulate policies to tackle these issues. What also emerges here is a tension that remains unresolved throughout the interview; what role can the Labour Party in opposition play in tackling these issues?

The Church and the Labour Party have been at the heart of Wendy's Alexander's life from early on, the daughter of the manse and card carrying member from her teens, and in Wendy's eyes there is obviously a common mission at the heart of both institutions. "It's clear that churches should be at the heart of the lives of the community in which they operate - indeed the life of the world. There is no bible that you read that is about keeping your hands clean from the difficult and challenging issues of your time or your corner of the earth - It's right for churches, in fact probably a duty for church people, to be involved in the issues of the day and the governance of their society and try and witness to their faith in their communities and that includes the political sphere."

So what role can the churches play in the political sphere? Wendy is aware of the many contributions that churches make, citing their work on poverty alleviation, homelessness and welcoming immigrants: "these are ways in which the churches have challenged the prejudices too often peddled in some sections of the media".

Asked about the contribution her own beliefs have made to her political approach, she gives a one word answer - "perspective". She elaborates: "one of the greatest challenges for all modern politicians is the 24/7 news media - the demands to "feed the media beast" - There is no time to reflect and we're all the poorer for that. There is little in politics that speaks to that part of Christianity which is about the number of times that you watch people withdraw to think about the issues of the day and then re-engage, and it seems to me that almost all politicians when they look back on their time in politics they regret the fact that they didn't have more time for reflection."

Turning to the Labour Party, why did Wendy stand for the leadership? Because "the time was right ... there was an opportunity for change". Change will begin at home for the Labour Party with Wendy at the helm wanting to 'reform, renew and reconnect.' She is committed to changing the Labour Party in Scotland, "how we are seen, how we behave, how we conduct our politics, what our policies are".

What are the key issues that Labour wants to connect with? Apparently they are the same issues that the Scottish people are interested in; not constitutional or institutional change but better services, better homes and more "in touch" politicians; fundamentally, building a Scotland where nobody gets left behind.

Tackling the issue of multi-generational economic inactivity is an area that she admits has proved a far more difficult problem than "we" had thought. It's an area where Labour have learnt a lot from voluntary organisations, how they can get alongside people to affirm their self esteem, grow their skills and help them think about what sort of contribution they want to make. Starting young is also vital; it is "just not possible to say we want the best start in life but not starting till you're 5 - when all the evidence says that what happens when you are under five is as probably as crucial in shaping life chances as anything that happens thereafter."

Building a Scotland that grows cohesively is a major challenge that Wendy identifies. She urges that we must each individually think about the ways that we are good neighbours to each other and particularly to immigrants who are making Scotland their home: "do we individually, one on one, take responsibility for getting to know people who have newly arrived in our country and mix with them socially and outwith the workplace?"

What is the role for politicians in this area? Here she turns to the education system and the need for a more personalised education. This should not be the preserve of children in private schools but she would like to see a truly world class education system individually catering to the needs of every child. We should in future be aiming for a significant number of children to be getting one-on-one support throughout their primary years.

As a young person the most important thing she learned from her parents is that what's important is not what you achieve in life but who you are as a person. Today there are "too many young people who grow up believing that your worth is measured by what you have rather than who you are ... The challenge for us is how do we create a different set of role models for the next generation. This links to a vital whole debate around the nature of childhood and what we value in our society."

With time for only one more question, what is the best piece of advice that Alexander would offer others? At this point she quotes Richard Holloway - "make time to watch the clouds go by". Some caricatures of Wendy have suggested that her head is in an intellectual cloud that is removed from peoples lives, but here she defends thoughtful and reflective practices in the best interests of people: "It is in these moments that people connect with their own spirituality and think about how do I be the sort of human being that I want to be at this time, in this place, in this situation, and that is not an easy thing to do in anybody's busy life these days."

