

## **"Meetings, meetings, meetings, meetings!"**

**Interview with Mark Ballard, Green MSP for Lothians (Published May 2004)**

"Meetings, meetings, meetings, meetings!" That's how Mark Ballard summed up his life as an MSP. His advice to any budding MSPs out there is to find the trick to surviving dull meetings, which for Mark is to find at least one item of interest in the agenda that engages him and to stay awake for that. Otherwise he finds himself sitting through meetings that are dealing with issues he knows very little about with the result that "a lot of the job is thinking why am I here? what am I doing?"

The reason he is here is that, after campaigning for a Scottish Parliament and then supporting Robin Harper (the first Green MSP to be elected in Scotland) in the 1999 election, he stood for election in 2003 but not expecting to be "troubled by political office". He attributes his election to the Iraq war breaking out and people using the PR voting system to let their feelings be known. Being an MSP is all a bit different from when Mark edited a magazine for a forestry charity that gave him "a deep love of trees and places in Scotland" and allowed him the privilege "to spend time with my camera yomping up and down glens".

But Mark has been politically active from a very young age when he began campaigning against nuclear weapons. After that he got the political bug and was involved in the Labour Party for 6 or 7 years to continue his nuclear protest. However, he eventually felt that Labour was not the party for him and, after getting involved in other single issues, he found his political home with the Green Party.

His spiritual home is with the Quakers. At the same time as he got involved with the Green Party he started to go to Quaker meetings, which was a totally new experience for him. As a child his only exposure to faith was through religious education lessons in school: "in the same way that my music lessons at school almost put me off music for life, RE lessons almost did the same thing with faith to me". He is still mystified as to what relationship those lessons had to faith or spirituality. However, Quakerism appealed to him because it did not dictate that he had to believe in x or y, which led him to read his Bible and he says he was surprised by how useful he found the Bible. He also enjoys the openness of Quaker meetings and likes the emphasis on "travelling together and learning together and sharing your experiences on that journey".

Quakerism focuses on listening to the inner voice and to your conscience, which is something that he tries to do as a politician. When Mark was involved in protest movements, the Christian teaching that appealed to him most was the figure of Jesus as "someone who did non-violent direct action" but still resisted oppression. Now that he is in the Scottish Parliament, he is involved in a different kind of politics where he tries to be more respectful of others, be conscience-led and more reflective, and to avoid falling into the trap of "they shout at you, so you shout back".

These qualities are reflected in his political heroes. He thinks William Morris was amazing in his political philosophy as an early socialist "on that real tide of Victorian reforming zeal, making the world a better place" and his art, crafts and wallpaper were things he created as a political act. A less well-known group that also inspires him is the Catholic Workers, who took action against what we now call weapons of mass destruction "as Christians, in a very non-violent consensual, peaceful manner"; their humility in particular appealed to him.

As a new kid on the parliamentary block, the thing that Mark finds the strangest as an MSP is "that you are supposed to know something about everything". He is still getting used to people shoving a microphone in front of him and expecting him to come up with a rational argument there and then, when he does not really know anything about the issue he is expected to comment on: "I found it utterly bewildering that people had these expectations of me". He says problems will come if he ever starts losing the humility to admit he does not know the answer to something and instead comes up with glib answers.

Another thing that intrigues him about his new job is the actual machinery of how politics works. "One of the things I quite liked with my bike is that it is sufficiently simple in terms of technology so that you can take it apart and put it back together and make it work". What intrigues him is that, from the outside, Parliament can look like a slick machine, with politicians announcing a decision that seems to have been arrived at rationally and logically, when in actual fact it had a lot more to do with who the politician happened to be chatting away with in the pub the night before. "That is what I find interesting, the dichotomy between the gleaming machinery and the actual people who are pulling the levers."

Living in India and Pakistan for a while when he was growing up taught him the importance of building relations with other cultures, and this is an issue that is very close to Mark's heart, along with initiatives like Fair Trade. He is also passionate about the need to share political power. "One of the things that people would criticise me for is being too nice and fluffy and green", Mark says, but he does find himself getting irritated at the way community opinions get completely ignored. He used to be very active in his community council and he says that despite the fact that communities know their area inside out, local authority councils in all their wisdom would just come in with schemes that either disregarded or did not take into account local views. What particularly annoyed him was the consultation exercises they had to respond to where they were only given the option to tick yes or no, when in reality he could have written an essay for each question.

As a result of these experiences, Mark's vision for Scottish politics is all about the sharing of power. He hates the Westminster model of politics where there are two opposing sides, where the opposition undermines the government and then, after an election and a change of governing party, they simply swap roles. He wants a "model of working together based on support and developing ideas". He would like things to be done the Swedish way, where the other parties support the Executive on an issue by issue basis. This is why he thinks that the Green Party should never enter into a coalition government, because in a coalition partnership the smaller party is pressured into supporting the policies of the biggest party. But he thinks that PR is a much healthier electoral system, as it gives people more choice.

He recalled the former MSP John McAllion saying that "his biggest disappointment in the last Parliament was that there were only ever seven different points of view and the final three points of view were only held by one person!"

Speaking about different points of view, Mark thinks that the churches have a very important role in changing the political culture by recognising the internal diversity that exists within churches and putting forward that diversity as a legitimate response. By doing so, the churches can play a key role in facilitating multiple points of view and thus prevent people with extreme positions from hijacking proceedings.

When Mark eventually does get to escape from his MSP life of meetings, meetings, meetings and more meetings, he likes to indulge his love of cooking and cycling. He loves to make and eat Indian food, although "I find that my salary has gone up and my time has gone down, so I find I am eating more and making less". It's just as well then that cycling is one of his other passions!

