

Anne McLaughlin MSP, SNP member for Glasgow region
"I love being able to indulge the social worker in me"

Independence is the driving passion behind the political motivations of the newest MSP in the Parliament, Scottish National Party representative for Glasgow, Anne McLaughlin, but her earliest political engagement was the result of more simple economic factors: "I delivered [SNP] leaflets or I didn't get my pocket money, so I was brainwashed at an early age!" However, despite briefly considering voting Labour when she went to college, Anne "then realised I was only doing it to be rebellious" and joined the SNP of her own volition at the age of 21. She cites Jim Sillars' Govan by-election win in 1988 as a significant SNP victory that got her "really fired up".

As for her own electoral ambitions, Anne is pragmatic. She didn't have aspirations to be a politician, (although an ex-boyfriend told her she argued like a politician - a comment which she took to be both a compliment and an insult!) and initially stood as a candidate out of a "sense of duty": "you weren't ever going to get elected, but we needed to give people an SNP candidate to vote for." For her, "it wasn't being a politician, it was independence that mattered". Having most recently worked in the Parliament as a researcher for SNP member Bob Doris MSP, Anne took her seat in the Scottish Parliament replacing Glasgow list MSP Bashir Ahmad after his death in February 2009. Since then, Anne has taken an active role in the Parliament, and sits on two Parliamentary Committees: Public Petitions and Public Audit, in addition to membership of Cross-Party Groups on Asylum Seekers and Refugees, Poland and Racial Equality in Scotland. This obvious passion for equality issues and social justice are two of Anne's other political motivations, aside from independence.

Anne's dad was in the Army, and so the family moved around when she was growing up, but she spent some of her formative years in Inverclyde, on the west coast of Scotland; first in Greenock, then attending Port Glasgow High School. It was there, at around the age of 13, while Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister, that Anne became acutely aware of the dire economic situation in the area. She recalled: "almost every Monday morning it seemed somebody else in the class's dad had been made redundant because they all worked in the shipyards. My parents were nurses so we were fine, but if it wasn't their dads, it was their mums, who worked in the canteens or the shops or the pubs nearby. Soon there was nobody in my class ... who had working parents, and it was really awful to watch that, those shipyards shrinking the way they did. Thousands of them all coming out at lunchtime and tea time - it's a great sight to watch, and for that just to dwindle, to next to nothing..."

This sense of injustice and a desire to stand up for peoples' rights has stayed with Anne, who has been heavily involved in the case of asylum seekers Florence and Precious Mhango. Anne met Florence through another asylum seeker that she had been helping in the constituency, but her involvement really began in July 2009 when Florence and Precious were on a flight ready to be deported. Anne was on the other side of the world on holiday in Sri Lanka, but "the Blackberry still worked", allowing her to liaise with her constituency office and the Mhango's lawyer, who managed to get them off the flight. However this was just the beginning of Anne's involvement in the case.

Anne mentioned a few times throughout her interview that "balance" is often difficult to achieve as an MSP: it is sometimes difficult to switch off, but the 18th November 2009 was one night on which she was determined to do just that. It was the 12th anniversary of the death of her father, and she wanted to take some time off to be by herself. But when "it all kicked off" with the detention of Florence and Precious that day, her plans were changed. "And I felt really guilty at first, you know, because I thought 'I've not even thought about my dad for 5 minutes' and then I just thought, well you know, my dad was a big influence on me... he wouldn't let me study social work because he said I was too soft, and I'd buy a big mansion and have everyone live with me, but the reason why he recognised that was because he was like that himself, and I reckoned he would have been happier with me doing what I was doing to try and protect them." Florence and Precious' judicial review case was heard in the High Court in London on 27 May, so Anne didn't have any further information other than that a decision was imminent, but she did note that so far, the Home Office have been more approachable than under the previous UK Government, and she is "very hopeful that they will review this policy of the UKBA refusing to work with MSPs" on Scottish cases.

Dealing with asylum policy, an issue reserved to the UK Government, has certainly highlighted to Anne the frustrations of being an independence-supporting MSP working within the devolved system. This feeling of being "strangled" by the restrictions on MSPs over matters reserved to Westminster is one which Anne obviously feels very strongly about. This extends to annoyance about UK Government spending which Anne believes to be unnecessary: "let's get rid of Trident. I think we've [SNP] been accused of arguing simplistically. I don't think it's simplistic - I think it's just simple, you know, that is something that we're spending billions of pounds on and it's completely unnecessary, but it's not something we can do as a Scottish Parliament or Government."

However, perhaps paradoxically, in matters which MSPs do have control over, Anne's frustrations lie in the degree of influence MSPs *can* have: "people try to get justice for themselves, they can't, they come to an MSP and then 9 times out of 10 immediately it gets sorted, and that I find quite irritating because most people don't know to go to their MSP or wouldn't feel comfortable approaching them, and they shouldn't have to." Nevertheless, although in principle Anne wished this wasn't the case, she enjoys being able (assisted by her staff) to help those who come to her: "I've only just realised this recently that ... I love being able to indulge the social worker in me. I love being able to help people, and I do find that quite often that's what we end up doing. I do feel that more and more we're providing a support role to people, in a way that I wouldn't have thought we would have been doing. ... While we've got the capacity to do it, we will."

Concern for the vulnerable seems to be ingrained in the work Anne does as an MSP, although as a member of the Public Audit Committee, she is well aware of the progress being made in efficiency savings and service redesigns that are being asked of Scottish public services such as the NHS in order to cushion the impending spending cuts, and reflects: "I'm not sure the Scottish Government could give any guarantee that vulnerable people won't be affected if the budgets are cut much further." However, she does suggest: "with independence however... that's a different story."

Citing travel as her biggest passion outside of Holyrood, Anne enjoys getting away from the hectic schedules of Holyrood. However, she doesn't like to get too far away, at least in virtual terms. If she was ever to become stranded on a remote island, the luxury item she'd most like to have with her is her laptop for "blogging, emailing, and keeping in contact with the outside world". Well-known in the online community as "Indygal", Anne has been a blogger for many years, and now feels almost "obliged" to continue to blog, as she gets complaints from friends when there hasn't been a new blog post for a while! Nevertheless, she feels more restricted in what she can write about now that she is an MSP. Even before being sworn in as an MSP, Anne found herself at the centre of media attention due to the content on her blog (she had taken photos around the Scottish Parliament building of MSPs during Budget negotiations - something which is not banned, but caused a media storm nonetheless). Although the controversy did generate "thousands upon thousands of new readers" for a few days after the story broke, she is realistic about her regular readership of the blog: "I think, to be honest, there's a community of blog readers and they read it; they read everybody's blog, and I'm not sure that includes people who don't know how they're voting; I'm not even sure that it includes people who aren't members of political parties to be honest." Regarding the wider potential for blogging, she can see that it might be useful as a political campaign tool if a wider audience were encouraged to start reading and engaging with blogs. She also praises the efforts of the Public Petitions Committee, of which she is a member, for its blog and the other measures it has taken to attempt to increase public engagement with the Parliament. However, from her perspective, Anne is content to be seen as an individual person who blogs, but who just happens to be an MSP.

An individual who just happens to be an MSP seems a good way to sum up Anne, who by her own admission had no aspirations to be a politician. Now that she is in Holyrood, however, with her keen sense of social justice and fairness, she is certainly intent on making a difference to those she represents.

