

# Edinburgh Reporter chats: Alex Orr

☒ Alex Orr looks like a PR man's ideal election candidate. Tall and tanned, when we meet him, he is dressed in a smart suit and drinking a latte. Which is less surprising, perhaps, when you find out that Orr is both a PR man and a candidate on the Lothian list for the SNP.

In fact it was through his work that Orr first became interested in the SNP. He said:-

"I ran the media campaign for Scotland FORward, which was the referendum campaign in 1997 seeking a yes-yes vote for the Scottish Parliament. Through meeting a lot of individuals from the SNP, such as Alex Salmond, I became quite convinced that independence was the way forward for Scotland."

Orr joined the party in 1998, and soon became heavily involved. He stood for election to The City of Edinburgh Council for the first time in 1999, and as a candidate for Holyrood in both 2003 and 2007. He is now a member of the party's National Executive Committee, helping to shape strategy on policy.

On the SNP's strategy for the May election, Orr is adamant that the party should draw heavily on its record in government.

"The main campaign point we are fighting on is the record of the SNP. Despite being a minority administration, the SNP have managed to fulfil 84 out of 94 manifesto commitments. We will also put forward to the people that we have a great track record; for example on abolishing prescription charges, 1000 more police on the streets, freezing council tax, and abolishing tuition fees. We are going forward on that record. We are saying, look what we have achieved so far and what we

can achieve if we are successful in the election.”

Orr also feels his party have a strong team in key positions.

“We have a fantastic First Minister at the moment in Alex Salmond . We have a fantastic Health secretary in Nicola Sturgeon, and one of the great triumphs at the moment is that health is not such a major issue because many of the issues that have dominated in the past, such as MRSA, have been addressed by Nicola as Health secretary. Kenny MacAskill has worked tirelessly as Justice Secretary – crime figures are falling, and we have extra police on the streets. Additionally we have John Swinney, and, through helping small businesses and managing effectively the budget, we are in a position where unemployment in Scotland is falling in comparison to the rest of the UK.”

Of course, being a party in government leads to difficult and unpopular decisions having to be made. The most controversial of those made by the SNP since 2007 is undoubtedly the release of Lockerbie bomber, Abdelbaset al-Megrahi. Whilst conceding public opinion is divided on the issue, Orr is adamant that the Justice Secretary acted correctly.

“Something like the Megrahi decision was very controversial, and you have to respect people who opposed that. For us as a party, on legal grounds there is a well accepted principle of compassion within the Scottish Legal system – which we are abiding by. There was nothing untoward in that decision and, if anything, it reinforced our position as a compassionate society.”

Looking to the future, Orr’s major hope for the next parliament is that it delivers an independence referendum.

“My hope is that the parliament, which is maturing, can move onto the next level. We have moved on from the union to devolution and my hope is that we can move onto an independence referendum within the term of the next parliament

and that we can become an independent nation on equal footing with other nations.”

Mindful of the rocky road the proposed referendum has travelled so far, Orr makes a plea to potential MSPs of all parties:

“I hope we move out from tribalism of politics, where all the other parties vote down the referendum for party political reasons and the people of Scotland have an opportunity to vote on it.”

Warming to the theme, Orr thinks Holyrood would benefit from an injection of fresh blood to revitalise the parliament.

“I also hope we have more people in the parliament who come from outwith a narrow political sphere. I hope we have more characters coming into parliament with experience outside politics. My examples of that would be people like Robin Harper, who came from teaching, or Ian McKee who had experience as a GP, or Jim Mather who had tremendous business experience.”

To wind up, Orr returns to party politics. He anticipates a close battle with Labour for electoral success, but is confident his party will prevail. He told us:

“I think this is obviously going to be a very tight election. However I think that the SNP will win this election and will have the most number of seats. However it is going to be very, very tight.”