

Edinburgh Reporter chats : Malcolm Chisholm MSP

Malcolm Chisholm, [MSP for Edinburgh North and Leith](#), comes to meet The Reporter at reception in Holyrood. Doesn't he have people to do that? Well, no, since it is a Friday, but he confesses that he quite likes doing it himself anyway. A very down to earth man our Mr Chisholm, who seems very comfortable in the back bench type of role that he now has, following his stint as a Government Minister some time ago. He has been constituency MSP for the area since 1999, but had been their MP at Westminster since 1992.

What are your major campaigning issues for 2011?

"I think the election is a combination of local and national issues, although obviously it is the national ones which will be playing out in the media throughout the month of April, and obviously I will be promoting those. But when you are standing as a constituency MSP, I think it is really important to focus on local issues and also point out your involvement with those, because I think it is different voting for a constituency MSP. You are not just voting for a political party, you are voting for someone who is going to stand up for the constituency. There are big local issues at the moment in the constituency. One obvious one is the proposed Biomass plant, in regard to which I have written a detailed objection. I know if you go around Leith, and in particular further down towards the docks, that this is brought up all the time as a main focus. I think it is really important, and people are always asking me not just what my views on it are, but also what the party's views are. I am opposed to that proposed development – my detailed objection is available [on my website](#).

But obviously I am also standing as a party candidate, so I

will be promoting Labour's policies. The manifesto will eventually be published with the full range of Labour policies, but two areas I have already spoken about a lot are, firstly, the economy and secondly unemployment. I think the economy will be a bigger issue in this election than it has been in previous ones just because of the general fragile state of the economy, and worries about living standards and employment in particular. I am also particularly concerned about rising youth unemployment, so I think Labour's policies in terms of a future jobs fund to give job opportunities to young people and also a guarantee of an apprenticeship to suitably qualified young people are important.

I have also been campaigning recently on the cuts to employment services in Edinburgh. We had a debate about that just the other week, so I think that whole area about jobs and youth unemployment is going to be really important.

I also think that, although the Health Service has been improving over the last ten years over the last two governments (so that is not a party political point one way or the other), there are still challenges in the health service. Labour has a commitment to shorten the waiting time for referral to a cancer specialist to two weeks, and also to set up a national care service. Again, notwithstanding the improvements in health over the last ten years, there are still outstanding issues, such as social care and care in the community. We are proposing that these two should be brought together so that you don't have the problem of health and local government operating in different silos."

In your constituency youth unemployment is a big issue, but there are some good projects there which try to attack this and which are now under threat. Can you tell us about those?

"The North Edinburgh Trust and all the projects which it has been running will be losing all of its funding from the Fairer Scotland Fund, although they have alternative sources of

funding I believe.

There is a very good project run by the Port of Leith Housing Association called T0IL (Training Opportunities in Lothian) which gives opportunities in construction work for young people. That has been very effective but it is not a priority project in the council grading scheme. The council has limited resources, so there are lots of good examples locally, but many which are under threat."

You have no difficulty talking about the economy as a Labour MSP?

"That is an interesting question you have asked. We have to quite rightly focus on what is happening in the Scottish Parliament to address the economy, and we do have quite considerable powers here around matters like skills and training and economic development.

But the background to that issue, and indeed the whole election, is the UK situation, which is dominated by the economy and the budget deficit. So I think it is quite right to talk about that during the election. It does influence people's attitudes to all these matters anyway and it will obviously come up. My own view is that the main reason for the deficit is the recession, and the response to the recession. That included action to save banks and not least the Scottish banks, and I don't think that the Labour government can be blamed in the way that they have been.

The related question is how you deal with it now, and my view and the Labour Party view is that public expenditure should not be cut in such a drastic way so quickly, as that has many damaging consequences. Ultimately, I do not think this is the way to reduce the deficit effectively. I quoted Keynes in a recent parliamentary debate, when I suggested that if you take care of employment then the economy will take care of itself. Perhaps that is not the whole truth, but there is certainly a bit of truth in it!

I support things like High Speed Rail for example, which we may not get any time soon, but the local matter of the trams is one where employment has been provided here, and hopefully will continue to do so."

What do you think about the trams?

"The fact of the matter is that the contract is at the heart of the dispute. I have said that there will have to be a full enquiry. There is a big division at Holyrood over whether it should have been started in the first place. Personally, I think that it is a good idea from an environmental point of view, but the project has been badly managed. It is not likely to go as far as Granton now, where there has always been a lot of support for it. The arguments for the trams included the proposals for housing development there. But even some of those who were against it at the start and who have suffered from all the roadworks, would now like to see the trams in their area. The trams will be a big issue in the election campaign. Everyone is always asking about it!"

Looking backwards what do you think you were proud of in the last Parliament?

"I really enjoyed the last Parliament. I think I have enjoyed it more since I came off the front bench. I am really pleased I did that because it has enabled me to concentrate more on my constituency, but also it does allow you to say controversial things and go against your party policy which you can't do from the front bench. Well I did of course, but that led to my resignation!

It is difficult to pick just one thing but I feel I have ranged over a great many issues. The moment that brought me the most attention was when I spoke out on Megrahi and although that was not the most important thing that I have done, it got me talked about! I got a lot of emails telling me I had done a good thing. I agreed with Kenny McAskill's

decision, although I was the only Labour MSP to do so, and it caused a lot of negative reaction from my own colleagues.

I think it is one of the great disappointments of The Scottish Parliament that all parties tend to follow their Party whip to a greater extent than Westminster. I also voted against the party line on the minimum pricing of alcohol. I feel it is important for the public that they feel their MSP will occasionally be prepared to vote against the party line.

I did enjoy being a Minister and being an MP at Westminster before that, but there is a tension sometimes between your constituency and your Ministerial duties and I am very pleased not to be in that position any more."

Do you anticipate personal success at the election?

"Well of course, thanks to the voting system, people do not have big majorities at the Scottish election like they do at Westminster so I don't think there are any constituencies in Edinburgh where there will be a huge majority for any party, and I am not taking anything for granted!"

What do you expect of the next Parliament

"I hope strongly to be reelected as I want to focus on the work to be done in my constituency, and I would like the culture of the Parliament to be challenged a bit more.

We really need to get a bit beyond and be a bit different from Westminster. Also I think the level of animosity between Labour and the SNP in the Parliament which is a problem. I think it is important that we have more mature politics than we have had to date. I think we have to work for that, rather than just hope for it."

What are the big things in Edinburgh North for the next Parliamentary session?

"The development of the waterfront is the big issue and Biomass sets that in the wrong direction. It has always been a big problem, not just to try and use the area for new housing opportunities, but also for employment opportunities. It relates to the matter of youth employment too.

I have been part of the cross-party group on climate change as well, and although I do not support Biomass I do think we want to see the development of wave and wind power in Leith. There are big opportunities for job creation round renewable energy in Leith. It is actually a good location particularly, for example in the construction of wind turbines and other kinds of renewable devices, such as the wave device being developed at Pelamis in Leith.

The other big issue which I have not had time to talk about is housing. Any constituency MSP knows that housing is a key item. We just do not have enough affordable housing at the moment."

The Reporter leaves Chisholm who is off to meet a whole group of people visiting Parliament. Another busy day in the life of....!