

Edinburgh Reporter Chats – Margo McDonald MSP

☒ It is clearly lunchtime. Margo is finishing her soup, sitting in the room occupied by her assistants and an American intern who is very obviously delighted to be working for such an eminent politician. And that is what McDonald is.

When we step outside the room, she is approached several times by passing MSPs or other Holyrood visitors, all desperate for a word or two with her. And she is funny too, with the dry practiced wit which began life on the west coast during her early years as a journalist.

So what is she expecting from the May election? Well she is expecting to win again. She does not say as much, but from everything else that she talks about, losing is no real option. She is the only Independent MSP at Holyrood, something she rather laments. If there were some more independent candidates then she feels that Holyrood might become a more vibrant place.

What will be the main focus of your campaign this time?

“I think we will go to lunch a lot..... Politics is about seeing and being seen.

Well actually the big, big question is the role of independents in this Parliament. I am the only one, which is greatly to be regretted, and I hope there will be more elected this time. This Parliament needs Independents. We don't have two chambers the way they have in Westminster. The second chamber is there to hold up or advise the first chamber. We are supposed to have strong powerful committees to do that job and we do have in certain instances but they don't check the executive. The executive sends its whips to the committees and so there is a party allegiance and so it feels almost as

if it is pre-determined before you start.

The committees are staffed according to the D'Hont method. (this means that each committee must have its share of parties according to the number of votes cast for that party, but it is also the method by which the party votes for Holyrood are divided and then list MSPs are appointed according to the proportion of votes which the various parties have attained.)

The D'Hont method means that the committees are completely under the control of the parties. You can get to the stage where the committee is balanced but it is balanced only for political reasons, not balanced for the substantive reasons of the legislation which they are dealing with. It is difficult for people to be elected as Independent candidates."

Just then the Labour Leader comes past. "Oh, Look! There's Iain Gray, he wants to join the Independents...!"

And what of your long Westminster career? (112 days is one of the lower records in that Parliament)

"I am very glad I had a taster. I learned a lot in that time when I learned the difference about power, policies and politics. It is knowing how to get power and how to exercise power, which is something that this Parliament has not yet learned."

Your main campaigning issues?

"My leaflet will say Vote for me, vote for me, vote for me because I am the best – it will be fresh and cutting edge!

No really the main point is that I am an Independent candidate and the Parliament should have more Independents.

For some people voting for me it will be the fact that I have said that if I do get in, I will try to reintroduce an Assisted Dying BILL and this time we think we have a better way of getting it through the legislative process. People who

are utterly opposed to that idea will not vote for me of course. There may well be some people who would want to register a protest against me. According to the opinion polls however there are more people in favour of the idea now. ”

Why did it not work the last time?

“Any big idea, and this is a big idea, does not usually go through on the first attempt. For example, the UK law on abortion took a good few attempts before it was passed.

The other reason why it did not go through, and why it is important for me to win, is that it will be possible to demonstrate to the members in here that they can have belief in something, or to fight for something, even if there is a big lobby against it organised by one of the churches, or some other major part of the fabric of our society. So if I get in again it will prove the support for my Member’s Bill. It should also take the heat off some MSPs if they think that people count more than pulpits do now. People have the right to have their own beliefs of course, but they cannot think they are more moral than anyone else.

I have lived in Edinburgh for over 30 years and I love it. You couldn’t get me out of here with a knife and fork. I am genuinely proud that I live here and represent the people here.

Interestingly, we have incorporated proportional representation here at Holyrood into a viscerally divided political society in Scotland. The constitutional question is there is in every room that politics is talked about.”

If you get your bill passed that will be a success then?

“Well yes, but only a start! That is not the only thing I want to do. I am interested in a load of things. I have a great interest in sport from my days as a PE teacher. Although I am on crutches on bad days now I still exercise every day. I am

evangelical about it. I was instrumental in nudging along the understanding of the place that PE should play in schools. Unfortunately two things are true:- A lot of people don't understand the difference between PE and sport in schools. Sport is an aspect of physical education but it is not PE itself. We are attempting to up the quota of PE and physical activity in schools at a time when many of the schools have actually contracted in space terms because of PPP and PFI. A lot of these were built to minimum specifications and that is why there is a lot of difficulty in meeting the artificial and in my view ill-advised targets which the government adopted of 2 hours of quality PE. Define Quality!

How do you get 2 hours in an overcrowded timetable and a school which only has one hall for everything. A lot has changed a lot since I was at school. Well we went out and played at breaks. We played skipping, with balls, or hopscotch and tig and rounders.. All these things were played anyway. That was another aspect of PE – it was physical activity. We were a lot healthier for it but it is harder to recreate it nowadays. A lot of traditional primary schools had big playgrounds. A lot of the PFI schools took the extra ground to build houses and take their profit from the houses they could build. There is still a lot to be done in sorting out PE in schools.

I want a new standard adopted with every child in every school every day having some period of physical activity. In some schools that will mean an afternoon off for sports. So one of these days could be a whole afternoon devoted to sport or an activity like swimming or Tai Chi. I am interested in trying to do something here in the area of PE. A lot of children are churned out right now without any real prospect of jobs. The councils when up against it would still think PE is one of the easiest economies to make.

Another aspect of it is the development of young talent in sport which is only possible because of the involvement of the

parents. When you think of Andy Murray you think of Judy Murray his mother. And Andy is still a Hibs man you know!

There is going to be an attempt made in here again to criminalise 'paid for' sex between consenting adults. I think that is silly and so do the police.

There is a running attempt in here to bring that legislation in. It is Trish Godman who is trying to introduce it. She is a friend, but I wholeheartedly disagree with her on this issue. The last time they hated me for this. I kept asking what 'Paid for sex' meant – does that include a night out at the races, jewellery or gifts? Sex has been bartered ever since time began. It will continue to be put forward as a piece of legislation that is needed, but I will keep opposing it."

What has happened over the last four years that you are quite proud of?

"I am proud of the fact that at a practical level I have tried to make sure that the indigenous community and the incoming community, particularly the ones who are incomers from the sub-continent, that they have integrated on their own terms. They still know who they are and where they came from. But they are now new Scots and they have integrated into Scottish society.

The story of this is that there were two cricket clubs. One was called the Pakistani Association and the other was called the Muslim Cricket club. The Muslim Cricket Club approached me not long after I had been elected. They found to their surprise that I was interested in cricket and sport. I became their honorary patron, and it was more than going to a terrific curry punch up once a year. They amalgamated with the Pakistani club and they had the wit to call themselves the Edinburgh Cricket club. This was at the same time that English kids from Pakistani families who only wanted to play cricket for Pakistan, whereas if you talk to the Saltires and the

juniors they only want to play for Scotland. If you talk to these kids they are from Pakistani homes but they are Scots. They have got it right, the way that the Italians got it right. There are a few people that we must thank profusely for that, and one of those was [Bashir Maan](#), one of the first Pakistanis who came to Scotland. He understood it all.

I also want to see things change in the Parliament. I haven't thrown my weight about yet – I might be tempted to do so next time round! We now have a Question time which is not a proper Question Time at all. The whole Question Time thing needs to be geared up. It should be of much better quality.

One of the big things I want to have a proper discussion about is PPP and PFI contracts which have to be open to much better scrutiny. There will be no rewards in my generation but it will be my grandchildren who reap the rewards.”

A load of young toddlers and babies pass by and Margo asks if there is a mothers' protest here at Holyrood today. You get the feeling if there is she would be up on her feet to go and help them out a bit.

So your end of life bill, more PE in schools and PFI and PPP are three big issues for you. What about local issues?

“Locally I will continue to argue that Edinburgh and the hinterland in the Lothians is so important to the Scottish economy that they must be seen as a special case.”

What do you think about the trams?

“There was a good business case for the trams, but now that has disappeared. When we had 32,500 extra residents anticipated along the waterfront then it was clear that you needed a mass mover of people which could take all the people from their homes to work and back again. It was clear that buses and cars would not suffice. But that is not going to happen now. One cannot happen without the other. They are

integral to each other. The trams would not bring development on their own.

But I think at the moment all that can be done (and I think the public should be involved in this) is to have three scenarios :- 1 to have the the trams 2 to have an amended version of the trams or 3 you can either go ahead or mothball them but we need costs analysis of all three scenarios. I have been told that we cannot get the costs however. Apparently all will become clear after the mediation has been finished.

Then McDonald's daughter, Zoe, who works for the BBC, comes by and passes the time of day for a moment or two, and tells her what she is up to today, filming the goings-on in Parliament. This is of course a political family. McDonald is married to Jim Sillars, who was Labour MP for South Ayrshire.

What do you think about the other transport measures proposed for Edinburgh?

Well the hovercraft did not work out financially. There are just not enough people who need to use it. But what they really needed at Granton, as I said, was a mass-mover. The city also needed the congestion charge. I voted for it, but no-one else did! The amount of damage being done to the roads is obvious. You cannot ask people to come here to work when it looks like a third world country. All the professional drivers that I have spoken to said that the city would eventually gridlock. But in the case of the trams if you consider the three contingencies, with the cost of each outlined clearly then the information would be in a form that people could understand very easily."

And with that McDonald is off to meet some other people who have been sitting patiently waiting round the corner, having generously allowed The Reporter far more of her time than was requested.