

# Robin Harper looks back on twelve years in Parliament

✘ May 6<sup>th</sup> 1999 was a historic day in Scottish politics. Not only did this date mark the first Scottish parliamentary election for more than 250 years, but it also saw the election of the UK's first Green parliamentarian. Twelve years on, Robin Harper MSP sits resplendent sporting his trademark multi-coloured tie, looking back over a frontline political career which will come to an end when he stands down as an MSP on March 22<sup>nd</sup>.

The road to electoral success was a long one for the politician and for the Green party. Harper can pinpoint the exact date that his personal journey began. He says: "The 11<sup>th</sup> of July 1985 when Rainbow Warrior was sunk was the very specific trigger for my interest in environmental politics."

Outraged by the sinking of Greenpeace's flagship vessel, Harper, then a Modern Studies teacher at Boroughmuir High School, joined the fledgling Scottish Ecology Party, which would shortly evolve into the Scottish Green Party. Harper was identified as a leader within the movement from the outset. He says of his early days: "I got involved (with the organisation of the party) in the first party meeting I attended, which they asked to hold in my house which should have aroused my suspicions. Then at the AGM of the Edinburgh branch I was asked to become the convener for the Edinburgh area, so I became an activist on my very first day."

By 1986, Harper stood for election as a councillor in the Tollcross ward garnering around 3% of the vote. Over the next thirteen years, Harper was the Green Party candidate at eleven Local Authority, European and Westminster elections all over Scotland. As Harper says: "Wherever in Scotland there was an

election, I was there saying 'Let me stand as a Green candidate.' I'm glad to say I was never turned down."

The advent of the Scottish Parliament offered Harper and the Greens a real opportunity for electoral success. The Green party polled 6.9% in the Lothians list vote, enough to secure a seat for the party's top candidate – Robin Harper. Of his landmark election he says: "In terms of elation there was nothing to beat making history in 1999. That was just extraordinary."

The party used their success in 1999 as a stepping stone to further electoral gains. Indeed the election in 2003 saw six more Green MSPs elected to Holyrood alongside Harper. Of that night he says: "It was a different sort of elation in 2003, to come back with six more MSPs it was a 'Could you believe it' moment to do so well." Though the 2007 election saw the party's representation at Holyrood cut back to two, Harper and Patrick Harvie, the party did perform well at Local Authority elections in Scotland on the same night.

As an MSP throughout the parliament's twelve years, Harper admits that he will miss the day-to-day cut and thrust and the "wonderful staff and friends from all sides of the parliament.". He is also a staunch defender of the parliament's record saying: "The smoking ban, which other countries have adopted, mental health legislation and the abolition of tuition fees and prescription charges – all these things mount up. We have now passed an amount of specific Scottish legislation that would have taken Westminster 100 years to pass."

Of his own contribution, Harper feels great satisfaction from what he describes as "little victories" such as widening discussion subjects and having amendments on individual bills passed. Indeed he says: "Every single time an amendment is accepted, is cause for a small celebration."

Harper certainly feels he is leaving Holyrood with the Green party in a strong position. He says of the forthcoming election: "Of course every election is an opportunity, but this one in particular is a fantastic chance to get back to or better our previous numbers."

As for his own future, Harper will not be slowing down too much just yet. While he does intend to spend some time pursuing his hobby of collecting acorns he will remain a busy man. On March 12<sup>th</sup> he launches his autobiography, *Dear Mr Harper*, while on March 24<sup>th</sup> he attends his first meeting as a board member of the [National Trust for Scotland](#).

One way or another, the Scottish public has not seen the last of Robin Harper and his multi-coloured scarves and ties!