

# Edinburgh Reporter chats: Alison Johnstone Green Party candidate

✘ Although Alison Johnstone is a city councillor, we cannot speak to her actually in the City Chambers as it is forbidden at this point in the election 2011 campaign! But that means we can instead repair to the nearest coffee shop which is very pleasant, and so is Johnstone.

She is a very straightforward politician. The Reporter has been impressed on the occasions Councillor Johnstone has spoken at Full Council meetings. She is one of the councillors who always has something to say, and says it very well.

Asked why she is planning a leap from local to national politics, she has a very clear answer:- "I am standing because it is important that we have strong Green representation in Parliament. I think the parliament and the country would be weaker without it."

She hopes to fill the space of Robin Harper who is retiring but admits it is:-"A huge scarf to fill! (Harper is well known for his colourful scarves and ties) Robin is a hard act to follow. He is irreplaceable, one of the big characters in Scottish politics, and is literally one of the parliament's colourful characters. There are a lot of grey people in there! Even those who disagree with him would have no doubt about the sincerity of his beliefs and the way he has worked so hard to get the message across."

**So what is Johnstone's own message?**

"Well the Greens do not accept that the level, severity and

the speed with which cuts are being inflicted on the public sector is the way to go. We think the potential for damage is immense. We think it is far too much far too soon. There are leading economists who strongly agree with that. We are not deficit deniers. We admit that there is a deficit and we have to work to address that, but we do not need to slash and burn the way that is proposed. We would take things far more slowly and look very carefully at the impact.

I don't see how the private sector can be expected to step in and fill the breach. Scotland does have a lot of jobs in the public sector and indeed, has a strong and responsive public sector, but that does not mean that it cannot be more efficient. We should always be looking for and addressing any waste.

As a councillor we have had to look at our budget and it is a little difficult to justify money being being spent on portraits of Provosts and the like. In current times all of this needs to be looked at very carefully indeed., but if we cut thousands of jobs – 1200 in our council alone – how are these people, who may end up on benefits, going to contribute to taxes and so on. It does not add up.”

### **What about the Greens on green issues?**

“Well, a lot of these matters are intertwined. For example, the Greens would not spend £2.3bn on an additional, not a replacement, an additional bridge over the River Forth. It is suggested that the dehumidification process is going as well as the Chief Engineer expects. 16 other similar suspension bridges across the world have been repaired. The figures we have seen suggest that the Forth Road Bridge could be fixed for £122m.

If we simply hold off till next year when we would have a full and comprehensive report, we would know if the new bridge is really needed or is simply a government vanity project.

It certainly does not look as though the bridge is **not** fixable. I have examined the Chief Engineer's Reports in some detail. We have until 2017-18 to make a decision about it, and this is not the time to be rushed into these major decisions. The money would cover the cost of 35,000 new homes. We have 160,000 people on housing waiting lists. CEC have just closed two nurseries in Edinburgh to save a fairly small amount of money by comparison.

So spending less on these major infrastructure projects would mean we could make major investment in public services, schools and nurseries would be one of our priority. There are some schools where the children do not even get jotters – just bits of paper.

We will continue to campaign against the folly that is the Forth Replacement Crossing, and to campaign for projects like the Climate Challenge Fund which has seen local community groups get £37m which has enabled them to lower carbon emissions. It has got lot of parents and families involved throughout Scotland. The NHS for example have freed up a plot at the Royal Edinburgh Hospital at Morningside where the land was just derelict. It is now an area where they are growing potatoes in raised beds for example. Big companies have started going there for staff training and team-building days.

Certainly in parts of the inner city where there is not so much space or so many recreational opportunities, these initiatives can be very important.

Other matters such as Transport – we are completely against the West Edinburgh Planning Framework where the airport would double in size and the Royal Highland Show would move. But maybe people are already coming to their senses about that. There is a realisation that oil is becoming more and more expensive which probably means less people can afford to fly anyway.”

## **And we have to ask you about Edinburgh Trams....**

“One thing that needs to be stated strongly is that all five parties in the council, including the SNP, voted for the final contract, the final sign-off of funds for the trams.

The Greens support trams as a form of sustainable transport. As I have said oil is becoming more expensive, but more importantly, the city is already breaching the new air pollution limits. In the whole city centre and areas like Great Junction Street and Corstorphine, the air quality is not good enough. Traffic is increasing week on week, month on month. It is getting worse so we do have to address that. We did support the trams but we do not support the absolutely shambolic way in which the whole thing has been handled. At the root of that is the conflict between the leading members of the city council. We have a Lib-Dem/SNP coalition on the council and the SNP members want to play politics with this issue. Personally, I think if you are running a city council where a decision has been made, you have to work for the best interests of the city. I think you have to have that level of maturity. I think the tram project has been undermined in this way.

Edinburgh is such a popular city that it will continue to grow. The tram business case was based on having 30,000 new homes at the Waterfront; in effect a new town the size of Falkirk. You can only get so many number 22 buses up Leith Walk! I think on every view so far – and the original business case has still not been proved to be flawed – no one could have foreseen the global recession which was about to hit. I think we have to get better at handling major infrastructure projects. I hope that whoever is hellbent on the Forth Replacement Crossing is learning lessons, because we don't have a fantastic track record in Scotland of being able to handle these things. If we had only looked properly at about 100 metres of Princes Street first of all then we might have seen that there was more work to be done there than previously

envisaged!

One other solution is that perhaps we could have one person appointed as a City Engineer, that might be a good thing. But instead it seems we are more focussed on the things that make Edinburgh famous – our festivals, our architecture and so on but maybe we need to think of something more mundane like a city engineer.”

**You have been a councillor for a while, although you have not yet served in Parliament, but what is your biggest political achievement so far?**

“It is true that I really don’t have a political background. I have not had a traditional route into politics. I was involved in athletics from the age of 13, and it was when The City of Edinburgh Council wanted to build luxury flats on my local region playing field contrary to regional, national and local planning policy guidelines that I got involved with a group, ‘Keep Meggetland Green’. I was so clueless that I contacted Donald Dewar, Alex Salmond and Robin Harper telling them all how wrong it was!

We raised £12,000 to appoint John Campbell QC to fight it on our behalf when it went to public enquiry, although we lost. I think I got involved because as a member of the public even I could see it was wrong, and contrary to all the planning guidelines. I came up to the council meeting, heard everyone say how terrible it was and then vote for it! I became incensed with the idea that nobody was listening, and to a degree I still am. I have been involved in seven school closures, and there is an air of inevitability about it all. It is my view that often the decision has been made and nothing seems to change after consultation. We have just seen the same again in the recent closing of two nurseries in Edinburgh. I continue to strive to try and ensure that the council does listen to what people are saying and what they want.

I have worked very hard with schools, and through my lifelong involvement in athletics (Johnstone is now a qualified athletics coach too) I am very concerned with the amount of PE that our children are getting. We are not even meeting the national minimum which the government recommend, which is two hours of PE per week. But 50% of the children in Edinburgh are not getting that. Apparently Lothians has the fattest children in Scotland, and we have some of the most affluent areas in Scotland right here. I think there is a lot more we need to do on that front.

I do not take my election for granted but whatever I am doing I am trying very hard to ensure that Green representation is continued in Lothians.”

### **What would you propose to do about the nation's Health?**

Well we need to be doing much more in preventative health. If 1% of the health budget was given over to offer free access to free facilities for physical recreation, I think the country would be a lot better off. Modern life means that it is very easy to do nothing physical. Some physios reckon that osteoporosis is a result of our lifestyle. For example we no longer have to haul bags back from the supermarket, all that activity has been taken away from us. I will continue to campaign on all the areas where I already have some interest and some knowledge.

I would like it to be safer for people to walk around the city, for example if we didn't have such air pollution I think that would be a good thing. For children in buggies it is a real problem. We need to work harder with Lothian Buses to move away from diesel-based transport.

I was recently successful in having a motion passed on Waverley Market. The Long Leases Bill has just gone through Parliament and the city council does not have a good record on what is and what is not common good land, ie land which has

been entrusted to the people of the burghs. This is a national issue.

I asked the council to submit written evidence which was agreed so they did because the Justice Committee are looking at a proposal that if a piece of land has a long lease of 125 years or more then that land should automatically become the property of the leaseholder. Currently there is a company acting on behalf of Sir David Murray, and the council are leasing it at about 1p per year. It is quite a convoluted arrangement but needs some investigation. For some reason the council had agreed a 206 year lease on Waverley Market, which I find very strange.

In Edinburgh we are spending £7m a year on waste going to landfill which is predicted to rise to £12m. We are still not really addressing the amount of waste we are producing. Food waste is the next thing to be rolled out here in parts of Edinburgh, so that is happening but there is still a lot more that can be done. Shortly after being elected I asked why we didn't have recycling in parks, such as in Princes Street Gardens and The Meadows where people are sitting having lunch and they are drinking from cans etc. We are continually saying that we should recycle more but as soon as you leave your home you need a way of continuing to recycle.

At home I am a bit obsessive about recycling, but it is one thing you can do so you should do it. I do take the bus around the city, or I cycle. I only take the car if it is totally essential. To be honest in a compact city like Edinburgh it is more annoying to have a car with you anyway. I think we should be doing far more on the cycling front. I have brought motions to introduce cycling proficiency training to all Primary 6 & 7 pupils. That was in place when I was at primary school, a long time ago, but we seem to have got out of the way of all these things. I am not the most confident cyclist, and try to stay off the streets as much as possible, but actually we need to do more to get the critical mass of cyclists out on the road

which would in turn make everybody a bit safer.

We still have a conflict or tension between the aesthetics of the World Heritage Site and what would further environmental good practice. For example there is some discussion about whether the red cycle paths on the roads are unattractive! It is the same story with the old glass in the New Town, where the buildings would be better insulated with double glazing. We are getting there with that though!"

### **What about the jump from local to national politics?**

I have worked with Robin Harper in Parliament since 1999. It has been really beneficial to be involved with local politics because you can see what difference the national government could make.

We were talking earlier about landfill. Local people are paying £7m for landfill. I would like the Scottish government to make it impossible for all the supermarkets to produce waste that cannot be recycled. There are some supermarkets which use far too much packaging. we have to think about where the waste will go. There is no "away" to throw anything to.

✘ I have worked with Gordon Miller to promote reusable bags. We have met with Economic Development here, and we have a couple of good ideas to take forward. Countries like Rwanda who have just suffered genocides and countries like Italy who we probably don't think of as a model for environmental politics, and countries like Bangladesh have all banned plastic bags – but we are still pussyfooting about the problem. So the proposal is to promote reusable bags and promote the city at the same time. We could use them to promote local high streets.

We have looked at the Greener Leith model where your bag is like a portable Clubcard. You take in this bag and you are offered the discount of the week. There is nothing to lose



with such a scheme. Gordon brought my attention these large patches of plastic bags in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans – they are stomach-churning. I heard last week that a boat had tried to anchor off the coast of Brazil and the anchor could not hold as it kept slipping over the plastic covering the seabed.

A recent UN report suggested that there are 46,000 pieces of plastic in every square mile of ocean. So we need to do more about beach clean ups right here on our own doorsteps. There is so much to do here about all of this and if government got tougher with the supply chain then the stuff would not be in supermarkets in the first place. People have gone into supermarkets and taken all the apples out of the packaging. If everyone did that how big a problem would that give the supermarket rather than taking it home!”

[Alison Johnstone](#) is the top Green candidate for Lothian in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections and is also Green councillor for [Meadows / Morningside](#) ward.