

Scottish Independence – Alison Johnstone MSP looks for a fairer society



Alison Johnstone Green MSP for Lothians writes about the interaction of independence and responsibility.

“Many of us who support the idea of an independent Scotland but would prefer not to be described as nationalists are motivated by the prospect of greater responsibility.

By taking responsibility we have a chance to create a fairer society. One aspect of that “fairer” agenda has to be correcting the imbalance in how government decisions impact on women. In a recent radio debate I pointed out that on so many issues it still feels like women are treated as a minority. It is clear that women are not even so much as an afterthought in the UK Government’s so-called reforms and cuts. Even the Scottish Government’s laudable Modern Apprenticeship scheme suffers from significant gender segregation. By contrast our progressive northern European neighbours seem to be getting it right.

Not only are countries such as Denmark and Norway among the best in the world when it comes to more equal distribution of income – the UK is seventh worst – but women there enjoy some of the highest average earnings. As a Green I believe strongly in equality, fairness and democracy. Next September we have two choices, and it is clear to me that a Yes vote gives the best chance of achieving greater equality between men and women, fairer income distribution and more democratically accountable decision-making. Welfare reforms being introduced

by the UK Government, along with its budgets and spending reviews are having a big impact on women. Child Benefit, Child Tax Credits and the childcare element of Working Tax Credit are paid to main carers, usually women.

However, the new Universal Credit will be paid per household. There is a serious danger that this money will not reach the women who traditionally do the budgeting in low income households. Money provided directly to women is more likely to be spent on children's needs than money allocated to men. Research shows access to independent income is valued by many women. Universal Credit also risks reducing the appeal of work for women, who are often the second earners in a household. And then there's the move to a single monthly payment instead of payments spread over different dates. This will simply add unnecessary pressure. The referendum presents an opportunity for Scotland to take responsibility, and design its own, more compassionate welfare system – a system that properly considers the different impacts on men and women. And I believe we could go even further. A country's main asset is its people. And we ignore the potential of women and our children at our peril.

We envy countries such as Norway where they have pursued policies that promote a high rate of employment among women, along with a high quality nurseries funded by a strong workforce. Drawing on all our people will be crucial as an ageing population requires greater publicly-funded care, and we should make it much easier for women who want to work to do so. We should start a national conversation about our approach to nursery provision. Employers increasingly need workers with good people handling, problem solving and communication skills, the kind of skills our children pick up when they're in good quality nurseries. Nordic countries have implemented policies that make it easier to combine work and family life.

Since 1970s the number of women in work in Norway has risen from 44 per cent to 76 per cent. Over 80 per cent of mothers

with small children are employed. Norway developed a comprehensive system of support for women and care for their children. In 1970 only 13,000 Norwegian children were enrolled in day-care centres. Today it's about 280,000. Paid parental leave extends to almost a whole year and you have a right to work part-time until your youngest child turns 12. Getting women into work in Norway has benefited the government by generating income from tax, which has helped fund a high quality welfare state and other public services. It is a positive circle, contrasting with the spiral of decline that is UK austerity. Norway has also seen a trend of fewer hours worked. People don't feel the need to work long hours to make a living. Quality of life should be paramount for government, rather than the myth of everlasting growth. I simply can't see such transformation occurring whoever's in charge at Westminster. Scotland's women have massive potential going untapped. By boosting childcare and considering the gender impacts of devolved policy decisions we can take a small step towards realising some of that potential right now.

But we must take the opportunity of further responsibility, for welfare, employment law and taxation. Then we really could achieve that fairer society we aspire to."

Alison Johnstone is the Scottish Green Party MSP for Lothian and is a member of the Scottish Parliament's economy committee – See more [here](#).