

#GE2017 Fireside chat with Tommy Sheppard MP for Edinburgh East



It was just a short time ago that we interviewed Tommy Sheppard MP about his chances of becoming an MP to represent Edinburgh East. He then went on to make a barnstormer of a maiden speech without notes, and has been active in many Westminster debates since.

Following last week's announcement that there is to be a snap General Election we met up with him to have what turned out to be a long chat about the reasons behind an election called by Theresa May on 8 June 2017.

All SNP MPs have now been selected to stand in the seats they currently hold, so three years ahead of when the next election would have taken place, Mr Sheppard is faced with about seven weeks of campaigning to keep his seat. He won Edinburgh East with a majority of 9,106 votes in 2015.

[The Edinburgh Reporter – fireside chat with Tommy Sheppard MP](#) from [Phyllis Stephen](#) on [Vimeo](#).

TER : We probably didn't think we would be back here quite so soon!

TS : Well it's crazy times. I went down to Westminster on the train after the bank holiday weekend. I looked at my diary and thought this looks like quite an uneventful week. It's going to be quite dull.

Then within an hour and a half of getting on the train suddenly we are in general election mode! Never a dull moment!

TER : Why do you think Theresa May has called this election?

TS : Oh I think there are three reasons fly she has called the

election. The first is that she thinks she can crucify the Labour Party in England because of the poll ratings that she has.

The second is that Brexit is going to get pretty messy in the years ahead, and that's going to come back on the government, so she wants to cut and run to the electorate now before that starts.

The third reason is that if she leaves it for another couple of months several dozen of her members of parliament might well be facing legal charges for election fraud from the last election, so she does not want to take that risk either.

So this election is being done entirely for the convenience and benefit of the Conservative party. In that sense I think it is a monstrous abuse of the democratic process, and they're putting party political advantage above the public interest.

But it is what it is. It's on now and we will fight it, and fight it to win."

TER : Here in Edinburgh East do you know yet who your political opponents are going to be?

I don't know. The runner-up last time was the Labour Party candidate and former MP, Sheila Gilmore. I don't know whether Sheila is going to stand again. I don't know if anybody even regards Labour as the challenger to the incumbent this time round.

I suppose the SNP is in the fortunate position of having most of the MPs already there and wanting to stand again. We have all been confirmed as candidates while other parties are, fairly desperately I should imagine, trying to get candidates in place. They've only got two weeks to do it, it's not a long time.

TER : Do you think there is enough time between now and 8 June to have a reasonable campaign?

TS : No I don't. I think this is a cut and run election which is being done by the government with undue haste. I think they are trying to play the advantage they sense they've got in the polls down south.

I worry there is quite an authoritarian streak creeping in to the Conservative party to be honest.

It seems that a majority of 30 is not enough, they have to have 130. They don't want any opposition at all it seems.

Anybody who does oppose anything they say is branded as a

saboteur or disloyal to the country.

These are not good times that we are in to be honest.

Theresa May's refusal to take part in TV debates is all part and parcel of this. I think that is going to come back to haunt her.

Of course it is worth noting that this is the second year in a row where the Westminster ballot has interfered with the timetable of a Scottish election.

Last year they put the Brexit vote in June, despite us trying very hard and voting to have it in September to keep some distance from the main Scottish Parliamentary election.

But they went ahead and had it a month after, and now we've got just five weeks between the council elections which are already underway and this general election. It's not enough time, of course it's not enough time.

This is what the Fixed Term Parliament Act was meant to prevent. People were meant to know that the elections were on a five year schedule, so you didn't get the advantage of being the government and being able to fiddle the dates and the press and policy announcements.

That was supposed to be behind us we were supposed to be cleaning up politics by doing that, and now Theresa May has driven a cart and horses through that for her own advantage.

TER : Has anything changed with regard to what the SNP will be campaigning on this time round?

TS : It's going to be pretty much the same things to be honest. We haven't, sad to say, achieved what was in our 2015 manifesto. In fact we may be facing a government, after this general election, which feels itself stronger and even further to the right in the United Kingdom, and trying to do the things that we are seeking to oppose with even more vigour.

The road ahead is going to be a rocky one, but we remain committed to fighting this government's austerity programme, to making the case for investment in public services. We will be proposing again that we go for steady and sane growth in public spending, in order to be the engine of economic recovery.

The two years in between has not changed that. The whole thing is a lot more murky and uncertain, because no one knows exactly what the Brexit deal is going to be.

I think pretty much 90% of the manifesto we had last time we

can dust down and represent to the electorate.

The other added dimension to this is of course the debate about Scotland's future.

We are adamant that when the Brexit deal is known, probably in a couple of years time, and before it's too late to do something about it, then the people of Scotland ought to be able to choose whether or not that is indeed the type of United Kingdom they want to remain part of, and the one they voted to stay in in 2014.

I think it's reasonable to say that should happen at a time when all 27 other European countries will be deciding if that Brexit deal is satisfactory.

If the unelected House of Lords can have a vote on that agreement, I think the people of Scotland ought to be able to express a view on it as well.

But that is for the future, and we are not seeking a mandate for that at this General Election because we already have a mandate for that in the Scottish election from last year. The Scottish parliament has already decided that that is what it wants to do.

What this will be a judgement on though, is Theresa May's refusal to respond to these requests from the Scottish Government; her refusal first of all to seek any compromise solution, any differentiated solution that would allow us to protect Scottish interests in the Scottish economy and respect Scottish public opinion.

She has refused that.

TER : What do you think the mood is at Westminster? On Tuesday morning there must have been quite a lot of confusion. What's the mood amongst your fellow MPs?

TS : When I got into the Houses of Parliament on Tuesday lunchtime shock and surprise was the first thing.

You sensed the Tories were fairly chipper. They really think they have pulled a fast one here. They think they're holding all the cards. They think they are going to crush in their own words the Labour opposition in England. They're very cock-a-hoop about it.

I think they may get their comeuppance to be honest. Seven weeks is a long time in politics. The Labour MPs looked pretty depressed about it. Some of them are sitting on very thin majorities, and are feeling very unnerved and uncertain.

I think generally the biggest feeling was one of annoyance. We are only two years into the parliamentary term, the government has a majority, no one is trying to prevent it implementing its programme. This is an unnecessary election it's not one that many people wanted, and it's being done entirely for the benefit of the Conservative Party."