

Angus Robertson has hopes for Holyrood

Angus Robertson is seeking the SNP nomination so that he can become the SNP candidate in Edinburgh Central for the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2021.

The formal process for choosing the party's candidate is due to begin in mid-April. Whether or not that process will proceed according to the anticipated timescale is a matter for debate, but we interviewed him before the coronavirus pandemic took hold.

On the basis that something will have to happen about electing new members of The Scottish Parliament which is supposed to take place every five years, there will probably have to be an election of sorts by May 2021.

Both he and Joanna Cherry QC MP have announced that they will seek the party's nomination for the same seat. Cherry is at present the MP for Edinburgh South West which was formerly a Labour stronghold under former Chancellor Alistair Darling.

It is now three years since Robertson held elected office as MP for Moray. He rose to become Deputy Leader of the SNP at Westminster, holding parliamentary office between 2001 and 2017 until he lost the Moray seat to Tory, Douglas Ross.

Meantime he established a think tank on independence called Progress Scotland and is now writing a book about Austria. He spent some years living and working in Vienna for the BBC

World Service as a journalist, and writing seems a natural path for him.

I began with the easy question of whether his hopes for election to Holyrood might just be a shot at becoming party leader in succession to Nicola Sturgeon?

He immediately refuted the suggestion. He is a veteran politician with many an election campaign fought and won behind him, so it was not unexpected that he is also mindful of the way the process works. He ran for election at Holyrood unsuccessfully once before in 1999, long before being unseated in 2017.

He said: "My ambition is to become the SNP nominee, and to then run and then hopefully to win because, well, there's two things about this. First – one should never take for granted the notion that one would ever be elected in the first place, you actually have to ask the voters whether they would wish you to be their representative. And secondly, there's a wider point in this. I have never been elected to Holyrood before. And there are very talented people in the Scottish Parliament in the SNP and in other parties too."

Robertson explained that when he first joined the SNP the party was in fourth place at Westminster and that the position of the party today is a world apart from where they were three decades ago.

He then got the chance to stand in 2001 in Moray where he had family connections. But he really knows Edinburgh having been brought up in Stockbridge, attending both school and university in the capital. He explained: "Not only do I have a personal connection in that I do come from Edinburgh Central, but I think that what the SNP is trying to do, is the best prospectus for people living here. And I think that's the best combination that one one can have."

He makes much of the fact that he would be a 'full-time' MSP,

clearly a reference to the accusations against current MSP, Ruth Davidson, that she has not paid enough attention to her city centre constituents.

Davidson won the seat last time with a margin of 610 votes for the Conservative Party, succeeding SNP's Marco Biagi and Labour's Sarah Boyack before that.

He explained his plans for being an MSP: "The first thing I want to do is be a good MSP for people living in Edinburgh Central. And I think unfortunately, that is not an experience that people here have had for a number of years.

"That's because the current incumbent I don't think ever expected to be elected as the MSP for Edinburgh Central, and has been pretty absent. She has been absent from community issues and organisations that matter to people, has not been holding open public surgeries. She may have been doing them in private, but I think in this day and age, we still need to find ways in which the public can literally walk into their local library, meet their public representative and ask for their help.

"I want to reinstate that level of commitment to constituents in Edinburgh Central, whether they're SNP voters or not. An MSP should be there to work for everybody whether they vote for your party, another party, or don't vote at all. And I would want to make that my absolute number one priority to be a good constituency MSP. "

The constituency straddles the whole of the city centre, unlike the Westminster constituencies which all have a piece of the city centre within them, rather like the spokes on a bicycle wheel. We had discussed this at the beginning of the interview.

Robertson said: "There are other wider issues for Edinburgh Central and for Edinburgh as a capital city, which I think need a strong voice.

"Edinburgh Central is only represented as a contiguous constituency in The Scottish Parliament.

"It isn't at Westminster, and I think there's a need to try and grasp the nettle of a number of issues that are facing Edinburgh Central but Edinburgh more widely, which I think matter to people.

"There are very publicly discussed and debated issues about the kind of city that we are, the kind of city that we are becoming. I think there are some very strategic developments which are going ahead which I welcome.

"For example in relation to the transportation changes that need to happen in the city as we deal with the climate crisis that we're in, and also in relation to the economy of the city.

"We're facing a very big challenge because of Brexit, which of course Edinburgh voted overwhelmingly against, but we are currently represented by somebody whose party is in favour of that. That's another reason why we need somebody new in Edinburgh Central who will actually speak up for the views of people who live here."

Principally, Angus Robertson is all about independence for Scotland as you would expect.

He expanded on how independence would affect the capital city: "If Scotland becomes independent, which I believe it will, and Edinburgh is its capital as it is, then Edinburgh Central and Edinburgh itself will be the capital city of a sovereign state.

"And what that will mean for Edinburgh to my thinking will be

hugely beneficial. It will bring jobs, it will bring people from other countries. We will actually have a full diplomatic presence in the city. It will improve our transport connections, it will be transformational, I think, for Edinburgh. And I don't think that that's something that we've had much discussion of in Edinburgh, and I would like to be a part of that happening as we move towards independence."

I reminded Mr Robertson that one of the headers that the independence question fell down on last time round was the economic one. As you may have anticipated, he has an answer for that.

He said:"Well, I think if one looks at how our neighbouring countries have dealt with the challenges that many of us have faced, looking back to the 2008 financial crisis, if we look at those countries around us who are all smaller from Denmark, to Norway, to Iceland, to Ireland, I think we need to acknowledge that every single one of these other countries is more economically successful than Scotland is as a part of the UK.

"Indeed, in the UK, we had to deal with a lot of financial pain and austerity in the meantime.

"That should teach us something, which is that if you're able to make decisions closer to home and you have the resources, human material and otherwise, as we do, as they do too, they have been much more successful and they haven't put themselves through the economic self harm, as is happening to us at the present time with Brexit.

"Of course, we in Scotland in general, and in Edinburgh in particular, voted against that. Now if people believe that it's a better idea for people that we haven't elected to make decisions on our behalf (and we are governed now as we have been since 1955 by a party that has not won a single election in Scotland) we need to reflect on the fact that this is not

normal.

“And carrying on like this is just not sustainable.

“I would like us to become an independent country within the European Union, which I believe would bring great benefits to people in Edinburgh and restore their citizenship rights amongst many other things.

“But I think we should embrace the opportunity and the advantages that it brings of making decisions closer to home.

“Are there disadvantages? Yes, one is responsibility, which means that if you make mistakes, they’re your own mistakes, and you have to own them, you have to learn from them, and you have to do better as a result of them.

“But that’s what our neighbours have done, and they have managed it much more successfully than our current system where on the big biggest issues of our economy and the governing of the state, which happens at Westminster, it is by people we have not elected making suboptimal decisions for us.”

Mr Robertson also explained that the franchise for the Scottish Parliamentary election will be wider than ever before with foreign nationals who live here being given the vote for the first time after recent legislation.

He said: “I think that is tremendously exciting. I think that’s a great way of building social cohesion. But I think it also will behove people seeking public office, especially in Edinburgh Central to say well what are you going to do for everybody who lives here, regardless of where we come from, and it’s one of the reasons why I love Edinburgh Central.

“It is such a mixture, it’s such a mixture of different geographical communities and of communities by background of different life circumstances. Edinburgh Central has amongst

the biggest divergence of social income, for example, and so the experiences that people might have living in lower income parts of Edinburgh Central, will throw up issues which are profoundly important to them that aren't for other people.

"So an example of that is what is happening at the moment in Dumbiedykes in relation to their bus service. Some people might say, well, a bus service that can't be that important, can it well, for some people, it is. It is an absolutely lifeline service, you know, which is why LothianBuses really needs to look at a solution for this, because just cutting and leaving these people adrift is not sensible or responsible."

We also asked if there was anything at all that the prospective MSP might want to change at Holyrood. He mentioned the fact that younger members of the parliament may have childcare issues, and work/life balance issues, but admitted he would have to experience it to know what needs changed.

He concluded: "I think the foundations of Holyrood are strong. I think it is a parliament which is hugely open and accessible for people.

"I think there is a risk of taking that for granted. That is what we now expect, and well, so we should. We should expect our parliament, our parliamentarians, and our government to be close to the people. And I think that is one of the advantages of living in a smaller country where one does want to know – there are downsides to that, of course, but I think the upsides of being in a smaller country is the accessibility, the understanding who the decision makers are, influencing the decision making process.

"And I think Edinburgh Central would do much better to have somebody who has a full time commitment as opposed to the present time when it doesn't, and I would be honoured to, to fulfil that responsibility."

The Scottish Parliamentary Elections will take place in May

2021.

