

The Big Interview – Looking back over the five years of SNP Labour coalition

Interviewing the Council Leader, Cllr Adam McVey (SNP) and Depute Leader, Cllr Cammy Day (Labour) for their “end of term report”, it seems there have been no difficulties at all during their five year coalition – at least between them.

Cllr Day said that the parties have not ever had to use the dispute procedure in the coalition agreement which they entered into in 2017, proving that, in the main, they were able to agree on the important points. It is clear however from the resignation of several councillors over the five years that there may have been some in-house politicking and bickering, with several from the two main parties resigning the party whip and becoming independent.

The rollout of the Spaces for People measures led to the administration losing a deal of credibility, in spite of the fact that many people recognise the need for alternative modes of transport both during the pandemic and beyond to meet the needs of the climate emergency.

In the beginning it took several weeks in 2017 for the SNP and Edinburgh Labour groups to agree the contents of their

coalition agreement.



Councillors McVey and Day sign the new coalition agreement a month after the Council elections. 16 June 2017 PHOTO © The Edinburgh Reporter

Cammy Day has been a councillor now for 14 years, but he was remarkably frank about the birth of the administration, saying this was one of the most difficult things he had ever had to do.

He said: “The initial delay getting agreement from the hierarchy in my party was unhelpful – and remember there was a General Election called in June 2017 which again caused more delay. This was one of the toughest times of my life.

“There was a lot of stress and pressure to get agreement within the Labour group and the party, and it was an immense piece of work with many late nights. I asked two former senior councillors for their help as I had no real experience of doing anything like this.

“Ultimately we got all of our manifesto agreed as part of the coalition agreement, and we got some influential positions in the council to ensure that we could deliver what Edinburgh Labour wanted. The alternative could have been a Conservative/LibDem pact so I am very pleased we were part of

the decision making process for the last five years.

“What I am most proud of is the [Poverty Commission](#). The city has never had one – we had a social exclusion programme under the former Lord Provost Eric Milligan – but there has never been an independent public commission. I think the outcome of that was bold. We listened to young women from Muirhouse and gypsy travellers in the Southside talking about their experiences. One young woman said she has to decide on a Friday whether she eats or her children eat. That is unthinkable in this day and age. Then we have food banks which nobody wants to fund because it feels like we are endorsing them – but if we don’t fund them then where do people go for food?

“The ambition to end poverty by 2030 is a difficult goal because a lot of issues are outwith our control – for example the benefits set out by the Tory government. We may not be able to eradicate poverty entirely but we can at least work to reduce the number of 80,000 people who live in poverty here.

“This was not a council poverty commission it was a city commission with people from the business community involved and the work is ongoing.

“Then we set up a Climate Commission – ours was the first local authority to come out and say that we need to stop living this way, encourage changes in ways of getting around, approving a Low Emission Zone, and championing the workplace parking levy.”

On this last point the Scottish Labour leader has said the party will not endorse the policy, although Cllr Day has his own view. A workplace parking levy is a policy which each local authority would have to agree to implement. Under the scheme, which has already been rolled out successfully in Nottingham where more than £60 million has been raised for the council to use on transport projects since 2012, drivers who

want to park at work would have to pay an annual fee to park.

The local authority can charge companies an annual fee for every parking space provided for employees. This fee could amount to hundreds of pounds each year if the cost is not covered by the employer. In Nottingham, the cost is £428 per year or just under £10 per week based on 50 working weeks in the year. It can only be charged to companies who offer more than 10 parking spaces, and it is up to the individual employer whether they pass on the charge to their employees. It will be up to the council of the time to decide to implement it or not.

Cllr Day said: "Personally I favour a workplace parking levy, so under my direction our group would not get in the way of it.

"I think most cities are way behind with EV charging points, and we have to improve on that, encouraging supermarkets and new housing developments to put in charging points.

"Another thing was our recommendation that the city should become a living wage city. I think that sets the tone of what the capital expects of people who want to do business here.

"So setting a net zero carbon goal for 2030 is again a bold one in the next eight years and whether we can get there is a challenge but we should be doing everything we possibly can."



The Council, National Galleries of Scotland, National Museums of Scotland, Edinburgh College, Scottish Government and Scottish Futures Trust signed an agreement in 2018 to transform the Waterfront at Granton..

L-R Jon Buglass, Dr Gordon Rintoul, National Galleries of Scotland, Christa Reekie, Scottish Futures Trust, Jacqueline Ridge, National Galleries of Scotland, Cllr Adam McVey, Aileen Campbell, Cabinet Secretary for Communities and Local Government, Cllr Cammy Day, Andrew Kerr Council Chief Executive

Finally for most of his term as a councillor there has been discussion over development of the Waterfront, once owned by National Grid, by council owned EDI. The council then acquired the balance of the site from National Grid [with a view to developing](#) the north of the city.

Cllr Day said: "This is going to breathe life into the north of the city that has never been done before. There was even talk at one point of building Edinburgh's answer to the Dubai Palm out into the Forth. I would love to have some iconic structure down there but we have so far maintained the gas tower, we have received Levelling Up money from the UK government so that the land can be decontaminated for future use.

“There are plans for three to four thousand new homes and a school in that area, there are employers there and a college, a new national archive centre for the National Galleries, plans to develop the Caroline Park Railway Station with start up hubs and social enterprise businesses.

“We have turned our backs on the shorefront for decades and now we need to open it up. Once we start doing things there like decontaminating the land it will be much more attractive. We have just put contracts out to tender for the next development phase and I am sure we will attract great interest in what is a ten year project with really exciting opportunities for the north of the city.

“Granton wants and needs housing, businesses and shops and perhaps even the university could look at a marine biology type of campus on the Waterfront. I hope it remains one of the council’s top priorities going forward.

“I won’t pretend there have not been difficulties along the way, there have been bumps such as Spaces for People. We need to compromise on our position and being in minority we have had to learn how to get other groups to back that position. It is hard work but Adam and I have a common understanding – with the exception of independence – we have a common goal of trying to get the best for the city. Perhaps it would be fair to say that not all the Conveners have had the same progressive relationship.”

A lot of experience is being lost from the Labour front bench at this election including Maureen Child, Gordon Munro, Ian Perry, Ricky Henderson, Karen Doran, Donald Wilson. Cllr Day recognises this will be a loss to him personally with people who have been confidants and advisers.









He said: “What it brings is opportunity for new people and it will be good to have new councillors with new ideas. We have 60% of our candidates who are female, a few BAME candidates, members of the LGBT community – quite a diverse group. We are currently the only group with gender equality. I hope that all of these candidates are successful at the election – me included.

“Edinburgh council is the lowest funded council in Scotland according to The Scottish Government and yet we have one of the highest impacts of homelessness and more than 80,000 people in poverty making tough decisions with a budget that does not cover all our needs is extremely hard. Nobody put it in their manifesto that people should vote for them and they would cut council services, but the reality is that councillors have to make those decisions – to cut £50 million out of the council budget for example.

“I think the administration and council officers have done a really good job, including refinancing loans at lower interest rates to save millions. All of that is really helpful but there will come a time when it becomes impossible. People live longer with more complex health conditions so we need more social care, a lot of buildings need to be repaired or

refurbished but there is no money for it. Roads engineers have told me before now that they really need £100 million to fix all the potholes and that is just never going to happen because of the demands of other priority services.

“A big difficulty as a new councillor was wondering how it is justifiable to make cuts to the community you have just been elected to represent. We have to set a budget however – and if the biggest opposition party had been allowed to set their budget then bin collections would be outsourced and our policy of no compulsory redundancies would have been scrapped with about 1,000 council staff sacked immediately.

“It is difficult to explain the priorities to the public, for example the extension of the tram line to Newhaven.”



Launch of 2022 Edinburgh Labour Manifesto at Coffee Saints with Cllr Cammy Day and Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar MSP PHOTO ©2022 The Edinburgh Reporter

As for the possibility of another coalition, these have been somewhat outlawed by Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar but

there is always a possibility of a working relationship which falls short of a formal coalition. So what of the future and Cammy's own as a part of the council leadership team?

Cammy said: "I think being in power is why we do politics, and I hope we find another party which supports our Labour manifesto and be prepared to work with us on that.

"The top three things I would like to address (apart from climate change of course) includes the regeneration of the Granton Waterfront, continuing to fight the battle against poverty and bringing more council services back in house, There are many opportunities to create in house services, saving millions of pounds and creating apprenticeships on good terms and conditions."

The coalition agreement contains 52 commitments which form the council business plan, and the document has been used to drive progress during the last five years – although the pandemic did get in the way for a while.



Council Leader Adam McVey at Granton Gasometer when it was first lit up in the Ukrainian colours PHOTO ©The Edinburgh Reporter

The business plan is built on six wide themes which SNP Group leader, Cllr Adam McVey chose to highlight as he looked back.

He thinks this is one of the biggest jobs in Scottish politics, leading the council of the capital city, and a very demanding job requiring a lot of thought on a whole range of policy. He admits it has been much bigger than his previous role as Vice Convener of Transport working alongside Labour's Lesley Hinds when the policy area was much more finite and focused on a precise set of policies.

He said: "During the last five years as leader I have had to deal with all council services in a very detailed way and also of course what nobody saw coming – a global pandemic. Everyone has had to adapt and change their approach. It has been incredibly demanding.

"I have tried hard to be honest, direct, open and transparent throughout that time, and hopefully people will recognise that. Even if they have not agreed with me on every decision I hope people will respect how much I have given to the role."

Of course not everyone does as is testified by the often very personal social media comments about the council leaders, but McVey said he simply ignores this. He said: "Nobody wins a popularity contest by becoming leader of the city council. It is not particularly hard for me as I just don't engage with it.

"What still motivates me most in public office is the ability to find the solutions and work with council officers to break

through all the red tape and get them a positive outcome. When people are just rude there is no point in the punchbag talking back. If you are in a senior role then you have to expect some of this. Some of this has got better and some has got worse particularly for female councillors.

“But having said that our list of candidates is gender balanced. We’ve got this fantastically talented, diverse mix group of people. I am determined that we stand as a team against this kind of behaviour.”



Councillor Cammy Day and Councillor Adam McVey 21 August 2018
Photo ©2018TheEdinburghReporter

As for the 52 commitments promised McVey is proud of keeping the tram line to Newhaven “on time and on budget”. He thinks this is a major achievement and largely due to setting an experienced team of contractors as one unit with an external scrutiny body.

He said: “I think, to be on the cusp of completing construction this year, within budget, I think it is an enormous achievement.

“For young people we are swimming against the tide of UK benefit changes as well as a cost of living crisis, but we

have tried to shape as much support as possible within our classrooms. And that has meant building amazing new schools. I recently visited the new Victoria Primary School and I cannot put into words the atmosphere of learning and the impact that has had on behaviour. It is a real investment in those kids futures.

“I believe that every child in the city has witnessed some kind of investment in their school during our administration – and we have a commitment to hand over iPads to every child by the end of this year to offer equal access to digital learning.

“We have made progress on roads and schools and that is what I am most proud of.

“Last time round the SNP committed to spend £100 million on roads but has actually spent £120 million. I am not saying the roads are perfect, but we have balanced this investment against all the other demands on budget. But we continue to make progress on this. We are not number one, but now we are in the top half of the councils for performance on roads.”

And about working in partnership with the Labour group he is also pretty positive about the experience.

He said: “I think the coalition has worked with two parties which have put their own party politics aside to get things done. This has been a challenging term and in the most challenging political circumstances. It is a long time since there has been a minority administration and I think we’ve run it effectively. Nothing gets changed if parties cannot reach out and come to agreements with each other, but I think even our worst critics would agree that we have delivered policies

unchanged.”



East Princes Street Gardens at the end of October 2019 during the Winter Festival build Photo: Martin P. McAdam www.martinmcadam.com

With regard to the festivals and their future McVey admitted that “It has been a difficult debate”. More than 8,000 people responded to the council consultation, and now he thinks changes will be made. He said: “I expect there to be less reliance on green public space and a shift towards hard standing public spaces and making that work.

“The business community in Edinburgh has been hit hard over the last two years and the festivals offer an opportunity to support traders in the city, during the festivals.

“The tourism strategy dating from late 2019 still holds good, though the model has shifted a little. The thing we build on is the longer term ambition of managing the kind of visitor economy better, being more sustainable, creating fair work practices and many more economic models within the industries.

All of this still holds and it is not about selling the city to as many people as possibly any more – much more about the experience they have when they get here.”

And on the overarching climate emergency which affects any level of government anywhere, he is quite direct.

McVey said: “We will not deal with the climate crisis unless all parties agree. I believe that one of the things I brought to the role over the last five years is an ability to bring people into a room on the most challenging of circumstances, which on the face of it looks like we don’t agree or anything, and bring us through discussion and engagement to a position of cross party agreement.

“On housing we have built more than 5,500 affordable homes in the last five years. We thought we would build 20,000 over a ten year period. Output has recently ramped up, but it has not been a steady curve mainly due to Brexit and Covid and I am confident we will catch up to that target by 2027 which is the commitment we made at the beginning.”

Looking to the Future

As for the future – for Adam it is mainly about addressing the climate crisis. He said: “It will take mass investment in active travel and public transport, which is absolutely crucial to how we address that – transport makes up a huge proportion of that pie chart of carbon emissions within the city. So it’s really important that we continue to work on that and push as far and fast as we can.

“We have broken ground on the east west cycle corridor from Roseburn to Leith – that’s going to be amazing, permanent, high quality infrastructure for people. And tram is on budget but we need to go much further than all of this.

“Housing is one of the biggest factors in poverty and quality

of life. We are going to build new council homes – there is an approved plan to build £1.9 billion of new homes and tackle energy efficiency and damp in existing homes.

“The council reduced its carbon emissions by 60% by the 2020 target.

“We will also tackle the fundamental issues which cause renters in the city so much challenge. We have worked hard on introducing a short term let control area in the city and we will hit the ground running on that if we are the administration or a part of it.”

Both councillors are standing in the 2022 election. Read more of our council elections coverage [here](#).