

Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2023 – Mhairi Black In Conversation

Mhairi Black has been MP for Paisley & Renfrewshire South since being elected in 2015, when she was just 20 years old.

She took her final exam at Glasgow University after the election, and was awarded her degree in Politics and Public Policy with First Class Honours.

In the 2019 election she was re-elected with an increased majority, winning over half the vote in her constituency.

Black has supported the 'WASPI women' in their campaign against changes in the age eligibility for state pensions introduced by the 1995 and 2011 Pensions Acts, and was a signatory for a Safer Drugs Consumption Facility pilot scheme in Glasgow.

On Tuesday she was 'in conversation' with Times journalist **Graham Spiers**. The Stand's New Town Theatre venue was packed, the audience made up of a varied selection of people of all ages and genders.

On 4 July this year, Black announced that she would not stand

in the next general election. So the first question Spiers asks her today is;

'Why?'

'It's a human and a political decision. I've spent a third of my life in Westminster and now I want to have my life back. I'm not closing myself off to anything, but my initial plan is to breathe.'

"Keep hope alive!" shouts an older man from the audience, a sentiment that's greeted with a chorus of clapping.

Always a strong critic of the Westminster establishment, which she describes as "toxic", and "the opposite of what I find comfortable", Black explains that what people see on television is just a very small part of the House. She feels that the need for MPs to vote in person is completely outdated

*'Every single week you're in that building and there could be a vote at any time; 23 hours a week surrounded by a****les.'*

The nature of Parliament is, she points out, that you never know what's coming up till the last minute; Boris Johnson resigned when she was on her honeymoon. The couple tried again and a tent went up outside Nicola Sturgeon's house. She's looking forward to having a bit more control.

It's not all been bad though, she's enjoyed her constituency work and being Deputy Leader of the SNP at Westminster, a post she's held since December 2022. Since deciding not to stand again, she's done her utmost to support the SNP MPs' group.

There is, of course, much interest in her future plans, but she refuses to be drawn, saying only that she has no idea whatsoever. She's probably got another year to serve at Westminster, so she'll just see what comes up

'My Mum says this is either the best or the worst decision I've ever made.'

It's no secret that Black is frequently the target of criticism and abuse, both online and in person. 'Does it hurt?' asks Spiers.

'I've never been called anything worse than my brother's called me.'

But what is bruising, she says, is unfair criticism; she believes that anyone who says something in public must accept criticism of what they've said, but she's frequently targeted for things she hasn't said and doesn't believe in. That's what's hurtful.

She thinks that, because of her age, she's probably better equipped to cope with social media than some of her peers. She can more easily tell what's serious and what's not.

So what, asked Spiers, has Westminster taught her about people, politics and Mhairi Black herself?

She's learned that she's a resilient person – she's proud of how she handled things, especially at the outset – and that's she's also very lucky. The same people surround her now as they did before she was elected, and they look after her very well.

Turning to politics, Spiers asked if all young people who go into this field are too idealistic, but Black said no, she never expected to get much done in a place (Westminster) that she doesn't believe in; there has to be a shift in politics, in who becomes a politician and how things are done. We have to look at changing the parliamentary demographic

'We need a functional parliament not just a lot of shouting.'

As for independence, Black believes it will certainly come, but she's making no predictions as to when. None of the promises made by Brexiteers came through for Scotland

'since then we've had Tory governments, unfortunately often backed by Labour, making people miserable while lining their and their friends' pockets. Austerity and the rising cost of living means people are too busy trying to survive to think about Scotland's political future;

'This is the challenge for the SNP; we need to persuade people that independence is the only way we're going to deal with all these things. Independence will make things better for us. It's a practical thing, not a flag waving exercise.'

She's fed up with Conservative politicians saying that the way out of poverty is work; most children living in poverty have at least one parent working.

'We need a real living wage, not a pretend renamed one. It's just not good enough.'

Does she, Spiers asks, enjoy fame and living in the public eye?

She replies that she's had great experiences, but it can also be tiring. Everyone always wants to say hello to you, which is of course nice but you don't ever get uninterrupted time with your friends and family. Fame comes in useful though – when she once forgot her ID, she was able to get served in a pub by showing them her birth date on her Wikipedia page.

Spiers raises the question of transgender rights, and asks Black to explain. And *this* is what she says

'If you are a human being you are not an intellectual debate. There's a difference between being unfairly cancelled and

being held accountable; you have to be able to take criticism of things you say in public; that criticism is not the same as 'an attack.'

The vast majority of people, Black said, don't know much about the transgender community, which makes up less than 1% of the population. This statistic should in itself ring alarm bells. Why are people so het up about such a small minority?

But, she emphasised, people have to be given the space to ask basic questions without being mocked or criticised. She herself asked questions she felt uncomfortable asking, but that is how you learn.

The issue is, she says, when people ask those questions but refuse to accept the answers. She draws a comparison with previous attitudes to the BAME communities. In the past, we used to accept what intellectuals told us about them

'Now we see their views as racist. In ten years' time, people will see the trans issue as just as bonkers.'

Black's view is that, since at least 2016, some people have become determined to radicalise the vulnerable and the 'too-online'. You need, she says, to follow the money; many link back to US fundamentalist Christian and anti-abortion groups. It is Black's opinion that all women, trans or not, are fighting the same battle with the patriarchy.

'I'm a lesbian and a woman, and I want the media to leave transgender people alone and let them live their lives in peace.'

(Huge applause from the audience.)

'The only time my sex matters to me is in a medical setting. You would never say to an adoptive mother 'You're not the

real Mum' – and that's how we need to look at trans people. It's not about sex, it's about how you present. Misogyny is people telling me I'm 'not feminine enough' and trans abuse is rising because a person presents as a woman and someone decides they're 'not the right kind of woman' – you're not as feminine as we think you should be. And it is misogyny because we never hear complaints about trans men, do we?'

'Being trans is nothing to be feared. A decent person tries to make others comfortable and accepted, especially when those people are in a marginalised group.'

As for “safe spaces”, Black points out that many places, such as refuges and rape crisis centres, have been providing trans-inclusive safe spaces for years. A woman, trans or not, is fleeing the same patriarchal violence.

Has the transgender debate, Spiers asks, kyboshed the SNP? The media, Black replies, would have you think that, but the reality is quite different. The SNP is almost 100% progressive and supportive of the LGBT+ community. She's proud of their progress.

Spiers attempts to draw out Black's opinion on former SNP leadership contender Kate Forbes, making his own position very clear. She herself will say only

'Yes, I felt this in my soul.'

When an audience member asks if she agrees that there's bias in the media, the police and in politics itself, she similarly refuses to comment on this or on questions about the current investigations into some members of the SNP.

Asked by a member of the audience how women who are not in the public eye can get their voices heard, Black's advice is this

'There is no simple answer. The most effective way is to talk to people where they're at now, and build bridges so they can get to the same place as you. Whether it's fair or not, there is a balance to be found between holding your own and being approachable so that people can ask the simple questions. The best way to change things is through community.'

Spiers suggests that the SNP appears to have lost a lot of talent, and asks what it can do to support young people coming up through the ranks. Black makes two points; the first is that the party needs to step up its operational side (something she says it has hardly had time to do, given its rapid growth and all that has happened over that time); the second is that politics needs to be about policy not any one individual. Nicola Sturgeon, said Black, was a huge asset to the SNP both at home and overseas, but the party needs to be about more than one person.

She assures Spiers, however, that much is going on behind the scenes. She's proud of the young people she's met in the party

'they're now shining on their own. We need to nurture talent and get them elected.'

She believes that when independence comes Scotland will be more like the Nordic countries, and will be about looking after people and not just economics.

Spiers asked her about people who have inspired her. She mentions Ghandi, Martin Luther King, and more recently Tony Benn, Jim Sillars, Margo MacDonald and now Steven Flynn.

'I'm leaving things in good hands.'

Of Westminster as an institution, Black has much to say, none of it good. It is, she says, not remotely fit for purpose. The

Chamber can't even accommodate all MPs at once. She'd like to see a roaming parliament, moving between different centres such as Cardiff, Edinburgh and Newcastle; this, she says, would make it feel a lot more inclusive, but the government won't even consider it.

The building itself is a money pit for maintenance and parts of it are forever falling off, but when they do people simply accept it – 'that's just Westminster.' There are mice everywhere. On her very first day she saw a woman standing in the hall with a falcon on her shoulder. No-one else batted an eyelid. A guard explained that they get her in to keep the rodent population down.

'And this is the place that makes Health and Safety laws.'

Has being in Parliament limited her ability to express her own views? She's never, she says, argued for something she didn't believe in, but she had had to temper her comments from time to time. She says you have to remind yourself it's not just you, you're representing but your constituents and the SNP itself

'But it's not difficult to disagree with this government. I might say more once I've left.'

The SNP are almost the official opposition in Westminster now, says an audience member. How disappointed is she in Labour's 'lurch to the right'?

'Gutted but not surprised. It comes back to the political set-up we've got. Labour needs to win SE England, and that's increasingly right wing. Nigel Farage galvanised legitimate disappointment and anger in Northern England and put it to use; it's a difficult thing to untangle. I don't know how Farage persuaded them that he's not part of the establishment.'

When asked if she thinks the SNP has been in power for too long, Black says no, but she 'appreciates the sentiment.'

If the SNP/Green coalition leaves Holyrood, people will, she says, be shocked when they are suddenly faced with tuition fees, prescription charges and the 'extra bedroom' levy. The coalition is not perfect but it's the best we've got. It offers the best hope to people, especially those struggling the most.

Spiers asks his final question; which does she crave most, food, sleep, friendship or sex?

'Not only are my parents in the audience, my Primary One teacher is too. So all I'm going to say is happiness. I crave happiness.'

The Stand's *In Conversation* events continue at The New Town Theatre in George Street on Friday 11 August with John McDonnell. Labour MP for Hayes and Harlington.

Other guests still to come include John Nicolson (12 August), Jack Monroe (14 August), Tom Robinson (17 August), Bobby Bluebell (18 August), Lesley Riddoch (19 August), Tam Cowan (21 August) Andy Burnham (22 August), Ken Loach (23 August), Jeremy Corbyn (24 August) and Anas Sarwar (25 August.)

