

General Election – Alastair Shields – Scottish Conservatives – Edinburgh West

Alastair Shields is the Scottish Conservatives candidate for Edinburgh West in the July UK election.

Here I speak with him about the reasons for his candidacy and the main issues he believes impact the constituency.

Mr Shields grew up in West Edinburgh and represented the Almond Ward on The City of Edinburgh Council, albeit as a member of the Liberal Democrats and subsequently as an independent councillor, from 2012 until 2017. He has since become chairman of the Edinburgh West Conservative branch.

I asked him what he felt were the big issues on voters' minds in Edinburgh West, and he was quick to note population growth, and its threat to green spaces, as one of the most important. He argued that these green spaces are an important reason why people have moved to areas like Cammo, Dalmeny, Cramond, South Queensferry and Kirkliston.

He said: "There's nothing wrong with population growth as long as it's managed well, but I don't think it particularly has. The need for the explosion of housing has meant that our schools are full. Some struggle to get their GP appointments because there's so many people and not enough GPs or GP practices or services, or dental services.

“The green spaces are valuable for so many things. People might say, “Oh well, they’re just there to look at, no one uses them”, but that’s not the case. Edinburgh West has a plethora of clubs, societies, and organisations that work towards natural heritage and fishing clubs and sports groups that want to make the very best out of these kind of things.

“If you look at an area like Cammo, people like the hybrid setting of having suburbia and rural territory around them. But that’s all kind of been destroyed if all you’re doing is building over that, and then you have this cluster of housing – where you’ve just got no real thought in advance about it other than just housing, housing, housing – everyone bunched in together, and then no space for people to grow their family, expand their family, or have opportunities for their children to do more.”

“I think that is something quite unique to Edinburgh West compared to other parts of the city. I do appreciate, though, that that is something that other parts of the city have experienced themselves as well, but more so from my experience here, it’s particularly acute here.”



Davidson's Mains, in the Edinburgh West constituency
But Mr Shields will have to deal with more than the local issues to get round the controversies of the national Conservative government of the last fourteen years. I asked him how voters have responded to him and his campaign on the doorstep as the constituency's Tory candidate.

He told me that it's been "mixed bag", largely due to those national issues that are not in his control.

He said: "It depends largely on the area that you're canvassing in and where we've got a stronghold where whatever happens, we'll always have that support. And then we have wavering support where people have supported us for years, and the situations which we know have happened – and we're not trying to say didn't happen – you know, the issues that happened in the last couple of years in Westminster with the Conservative change from Boris Johnson to Liz Truss to Rishi Sunak. Then, we've got people who are just Lib Dem because

it's the best option."



Rishi Sunak speaking at the launch of the Scottish Conservative manifesto in Edinburgh PHOTO © The Edinburgh Reporter

Mr Shields also argued, however, that voters' minds are on the prospect of a UK Labour government and what it will mean to them. One of the concerns raised to the candidate on the doorstep was a Labour government's impact on private schools.

He said: "In some of the areas near the private schools within the constituency – thinking of areas like St. George's School for Girls – there are some Murrayfield residents around there that are concerned about the Labour proposal for VAT on private school fees and that's come up quite a lot quite a lot. So people are less thinking necessarily always about SNP and Lib Dem, they're thinking about the threat of a Labour government and then thinking well actually, is a Conservative government so bad? No one's necessarily said that, but it does allow you to think a little bit about maybe the reason about why this election has been called.

“Yeah, we’ve been in power for 14 years, but you can think about stability in the sense that we’ve managed to get the economy back on track. You’ve got two chancellors from Downing Street, in the sense that Rishi was one and you’ve got Jeremy Hunt as incumbent – and they’ve done extremely well in reducing that inflation rate figure from what it was. People are more conscious of that and I think, as we lead to polling day – when you heard about Reform being one point ahead of Conservatives from the polls – well, that’s now, but it’s a different story when you’re actually coming to the reality of going to that ballot box or polling day. Are you going to vote Reform? And it’s the same kind of thing we said of people that would lambast the Conservatives and say, “get them out, they’ve caused chaos,” I think people will think about their homes, their mortgage, their families, their children’s education, their own health, the health of others around them, the state of their roads and repairs and act on it.”

At Mr Shield’s reference to Prime Minister Rishi Sunak, the memory of his numerous gaffes since calling the election under the pouring rain in late May came flooding back to me. Does the candidate still have faith in the Prime Minister?

He replied: “I believe so. As I say, he’s made some misjudgments and things that he’s been open about. He has served as chancellor. He did that job very well during Covid times – the furlough scheme, particularly. The public can be unforgiving at times, and sometimes rightly so, sometimes harshly. But I think that he is somebody who’s got that background and I think he’s developing that resilience and I think that a lot of people just aren’t sure about Keir Starmer as well at this particular time. I think you’ll see a different type of Conservatives in the next Parliament as the continuing government, if we have the fortune of winning.”

When I asked about his change of allegiance from the Liberal Democrats to the Conservatives, Mr Shields denied there was “an ideological sort of motive” to having joined the Liberal

Democrats to begin with – they were just the only game in town.

He said: “When I was 24, I joined the Liberal Democrats, so that was 15 years ago, and I was living in Corstorphine. I wanted to get politically involved and I thought that they’ve got an office just up the road. It was just becoming active in the community. By that point, they’ve been holding the seat for 12 years, and by fairly seismic kind of votes.

“I got involved with them to the extent of becoming a Council candidate a few years later, which I didn’t expect to win but did so and I became a councillor, which was a fantastic experience. Three years in, a very early-on selection opportunity came up to which I lost quite heavily and it was a bit deflating.

“It’s never really been truly explained to me by membership or others as to why I was no longer favoured. I thought I’d done things to a reasonable standard and been fairly involved, so I thought the most respectful thing on both sides is to stand down from the party, just becoming independent, if I’m not really a fit for the party. I was an independent for about 18 months before my Council term ran down.

“When I was independent, I got more involved with the Conservative group and was supportive with them on the Council, supporting them with their budget, sitting in committees and I tended to align myself more with their values. I’m not shy about or embarrassed about the question because it will always come up as long as we’re involved in politics. And I guess sometimes it might confuse people. But there is a narrative behind it. Largely, it’s about the threat of independence. I think the SNP will be out, but that that’s not to say that they couldn’t be back in 10 years’ time with another figurehead who brings it all back up to where it was before. So it’s a case of just being very vigilant around it. And I think that can only be done with the Conservatives. So

that's largely my main incentive for being involved in the party to this extent as well."

And does he think he can win?

After a moment's hesitation, he replied that he knows it will be a "challenge" to unseat the Liberal Democrats in Edinburgh West, but that "all bets are off" in this election.

He said: "When Rishi stood outside in the rain at Downing Street, [it looked like] political suicide, and this is a man walking the plank for six weeks. But rationale kicks in and I don't think the people of Edinburgh West are mugs, and it's not in me to represent mugs. It's in me to represent people who are like me who see the same things every day who probably complain about the same things over the dinner table to each other about local things that don't seemingly get done. I've got a couple of hustings events coming up in the next few weeks. If no one turns up, I'll probably think that's the Lib Dems again.

"Never write off anything. Who knows? We've all seen shocks in politics. I think that I've got the right credentials, the right attitude, the right personality to be involved. I think I would be a first class MP, particularly for an area that I know well and have grown up in and lived in and continue to live in to this day. We've been Conservative before; things change. Things have evolved over time. Maybe we're into a time now where people are just a little bit fed up with the status quo."

