

Councillor Scott Arthur on his chances in knife-edge seat

Given the election betting scandal dominating the news one week out from polling day, I ask Scott Arthur if he's put any money on himself.

But the city councillor and Labour candidate is "not a betting man," he tells me in-between door knocks in Currie in Edinburgh South West, a former Labour safe seat comfortably held by the SNP since 2015.

I take out my phone to check the odds, and it's looking close; 11/10, slightly less favourable than the SNP's Joanna Cherry who's at 8/11.

Polls predict this time it could be even tighter. In fact, some project Arthur, who is also a professor at Heriot-Watt, will overturn Cherry's near-12,000 majority and become the constituency's first Labour MP since the late Alistair Darling a decade ago. Others have the SNP clinging on here.

Whatever the final result, it looks to be on a knife edge – and the stakes couldn't be higher. The fact it is now being eyed by Labour as a gain shows the extraordinary transformation of the party's fortunes since one of its worst-ever defeats in 2019.

If he was partial to a trip to the bookies, Arthur says as he

takes orders on which door to chap next from a party footsoldier armed with a clipboard, he wouldn't have bet on himself when he threw his hat in the ring last November.

"There was a gap of between 30 and 35 per cent between us and the SNP.

"I don't bet, I don't really understand odds," he says again, "but I wouldn't bet against me now."

Later, while tending to his garden, a man claiming to be a bookmaker gave a different assessment of the candidate's chances: "You're wasting your time."

"Joanna Cherry is going to win," he asserted, "I'll tell you what, I'm a bookie – I bet you £50."

The offer was declined.

We make our way toward the front door of a semi-detached house typical of the kind found in this quiet suburb and Arthur gives me a flavour of what he's heard from voters while out canvassing over the last five weeks.

"There's a lot of people switching to us from the Tories and SNP. People are genuinely angry with the Tories, but when you speak to SNP voters they're not angry – they just feel let down because I think they were promised something different," he says, knocking the door.

An elderly man living at the property tells us he "was Conservative" and is considering changing to Labour," but appears reluctant.

"There are a lot of people like you who have voted for another party for a long time and so changing is a big step," Arthur says, handing him a leaflet.

"They're so close to voting Labour but they've not quite crossed the line yet. Some of those people will probably not

end up voting, because they can't face voting Labour even though they don't want the Tories. But I think it's important you do vote."

As the council's transport convener and a prolific social media user – posting to his 7,400 followers almost daily from the 'best seat on the bus' (front seat, top deck) – he is one of the city's most high-profile councillors.

Likewise, the area's MP for nine years enjoys a level of name recognition, and Cherry's outspoken views on gender within her party have boosted her profile.

But I'm curious if being the the man at whom the buck stops for the city's potholes (Edinburgh was named the second worst city in the UK for them earlier this year), and a plethora of other controversial transport-related issues his brief covers, has negatively impact his campaign at all.

I'm in the middle of asking precisely that when somebody shouts us over.

"Hi there, I'm Scott Arthur," he says, crossing the road approaching the man.

"I know who you are, transport convener. You see that," he replies, pointing to a taxi parked in the driveway, "that's mine. Have you seen the state of this road?"

My question had been answered.

The cab driver goes on to complain work crews "fixed the tiniest wee hole" on a recent visit and the city's taxi drivers are "getting a ridiculous time just now" from the introduction of one-way streets and road closures.

But Arthur assures him the council is "trying our best to get the city back on track . . . that's why we have put more money into roads and footpaths."

He adds: "The stuff about reducing non-essential through traffic in the city centre, that's going to help you guys because more people will be using taxis."

The two part ways amicably and we turn onto another street as I ask if he will stand down as a councillor if elected.

"I think I would have to," he says. "I know it's not socially acceptable to say it but I really like being a councillor. Actually if I get elected to stop being a councillor would be a really difficult thing."

While likely to hold onto Arthur's council seat in Colinton/Fairmilehead – getting the highest number of first preference votes in 2022 – Edinburgh's Labour group would be under pressure to stand someone capable of running the transport committee.

Most of the administration's 13 members have their hands full chairing committees, while others who don't already are unlikely to want what is sometimes called a 'poisoned chalice' role due to the public criticism it can attract from all quarters at times.

"It's been discussed but not in detail," Arthur says when I ask about this scenario.

There is an air of cautious optimism among the group of activists making their way through the neighbourhood in a final push to get their vote out next week.

Elizabeth, a lifelong Labour voter, says she's feeling hopeful but hasn't got the "1997 feeling" yet, referring to the buzz from the party's historic landslide victory of that year.

"A lot of people are undecided," she tells me. "I think on the day a lot of people don't bother [to vote]."

"I want there to be quite a lot of wins for Labour in Scotland. I think there will be but that's not certain. I do

think Labour answers a lot of people's concerns if they get a chance to do it. It is a nasty game, they have to get a big majority."

We then visit a house belonging to a young family, but they "don't really vote," the dad answering the door says, adding he would probably be going towards Labour "if anything."

His partner shouts from inside she probably should vote "since the suffragettes burnt their bras to let me," but adds: "I don't know what to vote for."

The next door proves much more of a test of Arthur's campaigning skills, as a woman in her dressing gown grills him many of the big political issues of the day.

"Where's the money for the NHS coming from?"

Arthur tells her the Tories are failing to collect £6 billion in tax every year and have reduced investigations into people hiding income overseas. "We're going to target £5bn of that, largely by modernising HMRC, digitising and bringing in artificial intelligence to deal with routine things. We'll collect that £5 billion and give it to the NHS," he says.

"Why doesn't Westminster want independence?"

She's told that this election is not about independence but instead "about getting public services back on track.

"It's just about change, I hear what you're saying about independence but you can't be happy with the way things are in Scotland."

"What about Brexit?"

"I'm not a fan of Brexit," he replies. "I work in a university, I see first-hand the impact," but this is another "binary issue" which he says shouldn't distract from the "performance of public services".

“What about immigrants?”

Arthur tells her the heart surgeon who saved his life in 2015 was from south Asia. “In my ward I’ve got refugees from Afghanistan flown out by the RAF because their lives were at risk – they’re very welcome here,” he adds.

She interjects saying she’s “talking about all the refugees coming over . . . all these migrants coming in,” who she says are “all men”.

“Why can’t we just send them back?” she asks.

Arthur says: “Some of these people are refugees from conflict, they’re coming here because they feel under threat.

“The problem is some people blame the pressure on public services on immigration; the pressure on public services is due to the failure of governments to plan.

“There’s a difference between people who are refugees and people who are coming here simply as economic migrants. Migration is a positive thing and we do have a duty to accept refugees.”

As we move on I suggest his tone on immigration differed slightly from that of some of the Labour front bench as the campaign has ramped up (Starmer complained in an interview last week people “coming from countries like Bangladesh” were “not being removed”).

But he brushes this off. “I’ve never heard Keir Starmer saying that but what he’s committed to is stopping people being exploited by gangs,” he says.

“In Edinburgh, the backbone of the finance sector and the IT sector is immigrants from south Asia, they play a fantastic role in the city and are very welcome here.

“People see pressure on housing and stuff, some people blame

it on immigration. But it's not immigration – it's failure of governments to plan.”

And what of his personal ambitions? I point out Alistair Darling, Labour MP for Edinburgh South West from 2005 to 2015 – and Edinburgh Central MP for 18 years before that – also served as the capital's transport convener before becoming UK transport secretary, and eventually Chancellor of the Exchequer.

I ask Arthur whether he could see himself following a similar path to the top one day.

But he assures me he currently holds no ambitions to make it into the cabinet if he's sent to Westminster.

“I just like the idea of being a really hard-working local MP,” he says, adding his focus will be on earning – and keeping – voters' trust in this marginal seat.

All candidates standing in Edinburgh South West are:

- Scottish Labour Party – ARTHUR, Scott

- Scottish National Party (SNP) – CHERRY, Joanna

- Reform UK – HARPER, Ian

- Scottish Greens – HEAP, Dan

- Scottish Family Party – LUCAS, Richard Crewe

- Scottish Conservative and Unionist – WEBBER, Sue

- Independent – WILKINSON, Marc Richard

- Scottish Liberal Democrats – WILSON, Bruce Roy

By Donald Turvill Local Democracy Reporter