

Colinton/Fairmilehead by-election – Sheila Gilmore

I first met the Labour candidate, Sheila Gilmore, some years ago at Westminster, when she was an MP from 2010 to 2015. Now she is trying to win the Colinton/Fairmilehead Ward which Scott Arthur recently vacated to take up his seat won at the General Election.

In 2010 [we reported](#) that she had just won the Edinburgh East seat for the first time with a majority of 9,181 votes. This majority was larger than that won by Alastair Darling in Edinburgh South West. And at that time four of the five Edinburgh MPs were Labour politicians with one Liberal Democrat in Edinburgh West. After a few years of SNP representation, there has been a return to this position after the 2024 General Election.

Sheila is a seasoned campaigner and has helped many Labour politicians both win and keep their seats at local and national elections, including Chris Murray who now holds her old Westminster seat. She said it is sometimes hard not to try and do both jobs – as election agent and candidate – but she has Stephen Jenkinson as her campaign manager who was successful running the numbers for Scott Arthur to keep her right.

Golden Goodbye payment

Ms Gilmore has been criticised even for standing, as she was part of the group of retiring councillors in 2007 who were given a golden handshake of £16,000. The terms of the [payment at that point](#) were that she was not allowed to stand as a council candidate ever again, but the terms were changed before the 2022 Local Government election.

She said: “In 2007 I was given the payment partly in recognition that councils then had no pension cover. I had been a councillor since 1991.

“To be honest, I’m not even sure that originally it was intended to be permanent, but nobody had really thought that through.”

Experience

More recently she has worked with Citizens Advice Bureau, using her legal qualifications to help advise people on all sorts of problems including benefits, debt and housing. She said: “People are struggling with things like rents at the moment. I also do a lot of social security type of appeals when people have been refused benefits and it proceeds to a tribunal. I probably spend around 20 hours a week on this kind of voluntary work.”

She explained that the main reason for standing in the by-election is to help people. She said: “I genuinely think local government and what you can do for people locally, is really important. I think I’ve got the experience and the capacity to do it and to keep doing it. Local government is actually the thing that people are most affected by.”

At council level she is adamant that the councillors “must take people with them”. She said: “When I was a councillor last time Had a particularly tricky housing issue about

prefabs. The engineers report suggested that it was not sensible to put these on the market because of the construction material. But people loved the prefabs.

“So I took a step back and asked the officers to look at it in a slightly different way. It took longer but we had a very good firm of architects who were really skilled in doing that kind of community consultation. It was very emotional because people felt strongly about this particular type of house, but in the end we got single storey houses which was people were coming out of. They had feared that the prefabs would be demolished and they would be moved into big flats.”

Housing Convener

As Housing Convener Sheila was also quite involved in housing in Oxcgangs. She explained the council were looking at demolishing three blocks of high flats which had always been problematic. After a lot of expert advice she said it appeared the flats had damp from day one. She explained that at a meeting with tenants complaining about the damp, former Minister for Communities, Margaret Curran MSP, (coincidentally mother of Chris Murray MP) immediately agreed to give the necessary funding.

What had happened was that tenants brought their damp sheets and slung them on the table in front of the Minister demanding better housing. The tactic worked.

Sheila also worked with the Secretary of State, Ian Murray MP whose constituency covers part of the Colinton/Fairmilehead ward. And she lived in Colinton Mains for a while when she was young.

But she is adamant that it is knocking on doors which actually recruits people to the cause. So that is what she is doing all the way up to the election, often with other Labour politicians and activists accompanying her.

That sometimes includes Scott Arthur who Sheila says “definitely did the work”. And it is that work that she hopes to continue.

The local issues she talked about in the interview below include roads

Sheila said: One of the biggest complaints is about how we catch up with the state of roads and pavements. It is about making sure that all the basic services are properly looked after, because that’s what you see every day.

“And I think that after many years of local, local government funding cuts, it’s been difficult to keep up with all of that. But I think there’s been a bit more investment this year into roads. I’m keen to see that extend to pavements as well, because I think for a lot of people, the state of the pavements is actually dangerous. It’s not just, oh, it’d be nice to have it looking nice, but there’s a real trip hazard, which is all sorts of other consequences for people’s lives.”

As well as this she is a champion of getting out to speak to people rather than relying on digital communication all of the time. She knows that this can be difficult for those without a computer, a smartphone or without internet. She said: “I think that it is really important, even though we are in a modern age, that we don’t forget people. And sometimes you actually got to go out to people, not always just wait for them. And there’s a lot of talk recently about how people can access certain benefits, I very much in favor of actually getting out into things like supermarket car parks and making yourself available where people actually are. It’s worked before. I

think it could work again.”



Sheila Gilmore Labour candidate