

**Herstory:**                   **Jean McFadden**  
**Interview:**               **2 August 2010**  
**Debating Chamber:**   **Glasgow City Chambers, George Square, Glasgow**  
**Present:**                 **Jean McFadden, Frances Robertson and Sharon Thomas**

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Jean McFadden has been involved in local politics and in teaching all her life. She was the first female leader of Glasgow City Council (from 1979), and now in her seventies, Jean is still a working councillor for Glasgow ward: Garscadden/Scotstounhill.

We meet in the council chamber that is located inside the imposing bulk of Glasgow City Chambers in George Square, Glasgow. The Chambers were built between 1882-1888, and designed by the architect William Young in an extremely heavy ornate Renaissance Italianate classical mode at the time when Glasgow's wealth in trading and manufacture made her second city of the then British Empire. The interiors are if anything more imposing and ornate than the exterior, with a large sweeping double staircase in Carrara marble and mosaic vaulted ceilings in the ground floor loggia. Where marble and gilding runs out, glazed polychrome decorated ceramic faience takes over in the public spaces and corridors, while offices and private rooms are lined with dark deep red mahogany. All in all, this is an intimidating space, so despite the fact that these are the publicly accessible council offices of a politically left-wing city, I have rarely felt able to even linger near the entrance, never mind enter and gaze.

In contrast to my own sense of being an outsider, for Jean our meeting place in the council chambers is a familiar space where she has sat and worked through the business of council meetings for over thirty years. The chamber is laid out in a semicircle of banked carved mahogany seats, all large and imposing, with built-in armrests and embossed gold city crests on the red leather. Like King Arthur's round table, the sweep of seating is intended to be 'non-adversarial' as Jean notes wryly. The Lord Provost's seat and attendant desks and chairs for deputies and clerks fill the centre of the half circle, backed up against the windows (the Provost is the equivalent of the Lord Mayor in England). The windows in the chamber would have a dominating view over George Square if they were flung open as they are in the centre of the first floor, and one can imagine a Pope, Queen, or Demagogue addressing the crowds from this vantage. In the everyday, however, the glass is so highly decorated and inlaid with lead panels that it is impossible to see where we are. A filtered grayish light washes in to the chamber and contributes to the hushed enclosed tomb-like quality of the room when it is empty, in contrast to the doubtless hot, crowded and probably sweaty atmosphere when every seat is taken with argumentative council officials and local representatives during meetings and votes.

I begin by asking what Jean's response is to this working environment, what she is aware of and what messages the building and its spaces have for her? Normally, she says, she no longer notices, apart from days when she has visitors to show around the building. She does notice however: 'things in the marble' around her, such as the cloudy forms that suggest themselves from within the semi-opaque red veining in the pillars and panels that line the passageways of the building, all of which capture her imagination as she goes about her everyday business.

I wonder if there are any commemorative portraits or busts in the building that have had a particular effect of her? In response Jean describes how portraits of all the provosts are grouped together in the Upper Gallery of the City Chambers with two particular portraits that command her attention. Jean's personal favourite is the portrait of Jean Roberts by David Donaldson: the first lady to be appointed to the position of Provost of the city in 1960. In addition Jean also highly rates the portrait of Sir William Gray: last leader of Glasgow Corporation before the formation of Strathclyde Regional Council in 1973.

Jean explains that the portrait painting tradition had been suspended in the 1970s to save money, resulting in a suite of photographs of the Provosts from that era. Following this change, however, several senior figures in local politics, repenting the fact that they had lost the chance to be immortalized on canvas, reversed that decision, and the painted series was resumed with the portrait of Pat Lally by Peter Howson, perhaps one of the highest-profile artists who have been employed in recent times. Jean herself, however, not having taken up tenure as Provost herself, has never had her portrait painted. Although powerful in local politics, she has preferred the role of Leader of the Council which she conceives as having more of a 'prime ministerial' role in contrast to the more ceremonial role of the Lord Provost.

Outside, or rather in parallel with her political role as a Labour councillor, Jean has also worked all her life since graduating from the University of Glasgow, initially as a secondary school teacher of Classics. Later, as these subjects gradually phased out of the Scottish curriculum, Jean decided to go back to University to study law, graduating again with first-class honours in 1989. After this she began teaching Law at University level, authored several books on public Scottish law and indeed is still delivering courses in local government law at the University of Strathclyde School of Law.

Jean's entry to politics began when she met her future husband while they were both students at university. At the same time, her husband John was also a local councillor for the island of Barra whose administrative center, Inverness County Council, was extremely distant from both Barra and Glasgow. Indeed, when they were married, Jean and her husband spent the first few hours of their honeymoon attending a council meeting that could not be missed! In this atmosphere of involvement, Jean took on political work for herself, and found her first campaign in the issue of educational equality. At that time a small anomalous group of Glasgow city council schools existed, separate from the majority of open-access schools, that maintained an elite status through selection and through charging fees to their pupils. Jean felt that this was unfair and unjust and campaigned successfully for change in this area.

Jean prefers the notion of working at local level, because there is a stronger sense of real measurable achievement in everyday life. I therefore ask Jean whether she feels that women have an affinity with local, rather than national politics? Jean answers: that while often it may be the only option for action, as it is easier to fulfill caring commitments (for example in the family), by working locally; she does resist the idea that women tend to work in local rather than national politics because home and family are a primary concerns. Indeed, Jean rejects with scorn the 'old days' when women were strategically given responsibility for so called 'women's' areas such as social work, then kept 'out of roads' in Land and Environmental Services' as an example: which are departments with a so called male 'understanding'.

Glasgow is traditionally a macho place, famous for its hard men and heavy industry, and its local politics: left wing and confrontational through Labour activism, is part of that culture. Jean's route to becoming the first woman leader in 1979 came out of this context, partly by chance, and partly as a reaction against these entrenched attitudes in the late 1970s.

During this period in Britain Jim Callaghan was leader of a widely disliked Labour party, which was very soon in 1979 about to relent to the election of Conservative Party leader Margaret Thatcher. Locally in Glasgow senior Labour politicians in found themselves engulfed in corruption and fraud scandals, resulting in much of the old guard losing their seats. But for Jean at this time of political turmoil; untouched by any of the disputes that had swept away the senior figures, her experience and authority proposed Jean as key candidate to take up the vacant role of Leader of Glasgow City Council

Despite this particular gender triumph however, Jean has found that the struggle to maintain a place as a woman in a man's world continued, exaggerating for example all the 'normal' wrangling and antagonisms that are part of the political life. More vociferous male fellow politicians have been quick to claim the glory of initiatives, such as Glasgow's award of European City of Culture in 1990, for which Jean had spent long patient time negotiating in a less public way. And meanwhile, the press are often merciless and denigrating to women in public life by noting details of their dress and figure through the use of phrases such as 'stiletto heels clicking', that, whilst irksome to the victim, also pose a more serious threat to debate because this style of writing about women in public life obscures and makes trivial real political analysis, thus cheating the public.

Despite such drawbacks, Jean is proud of her work, and the example she has been able to give in her political and teaching careers by demonstrating in practice how public life should be understood by the citizen. In the face of ongoing inequalities in political life, currently getting worse under the 'new privilege' regime of the Coalition, Jean feels it is important to keep acting as a strong and resourceful woman, and is proud to know that she has been a role model to several of her female students who have had the courage to continue in difficult circumstances due to her example.

Frances Robertson, 2011

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