

Herstory: Johann Lamont

Interview: 16 August 2010

The Wedge, Glasgow

Present: Johann Lamont, Frances Robertson and Sharon Thomas

WE meet Johann on a very balmy August morning at The Wedge, which is a community resource centre situated in Greater Pollock, and our interview convenes in an large open plan meeting room that over looks a very busy traffic intersection. This building is Johann's contact base within her Glasgow Pollok Constituency, when she is not working from her office within the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. Johann Lamont has been the MSP (member of the Scottish Parliament) for her constituency since 1999, with currently responsibilities as deputy leader for the Labour party in the Parliament as well as being spokesperson on Communities, Equal Opportunities and Housing.

Johann has lived all her life in Glasgow, yet both of her parents are Gaels from the Hebridean island of Tiree. In common with many other Glaswegians from such incoming communities, Johann feels her identity to be double-stranded, in which her love of the city is intermingled with the experience and 'story-memory' of island life and culture. Although as she explains, her Gaelic is now 'faltering', nevertheless this was the language that Johann chose to voice her first public statements in the Scottish parliament in 1999.

As a woman, as a Gaelic speaker, and as a politician with a particular interest in tackling poverty, women's rights and the rights of disabled people, the theme of finding a voice and learning the craft of speech comes across in Johann's thoughts throughout our conversation.

For Johann the fascination with language and presentation began at a young age growing up surrounded by a family well versed in the oral story telling traditions of Gaelic culture. Johann is keen to mention her great uncle that she greatly admired, who was a tailor as well as respected bard. His great speeches and stories served as an example to promote the craft of giving voice to inspire and influence future generations of speakers. Johann also cites the importance of the Gaelic Church and its preaching traditions in relation to the craft of public speaking. Yet above all, for Johann it is the Labour Party that she now represents, which inspires her most in respect to the long-standing oral traditions: gleaned from a history of religious dissent and Trade Union activism.

Johann joined the Labour Party while she was still a student at Glasgow University, quickly becoming an active campaigner both in the party and then later within her trade union the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS). Now as a Parliamentary Member, Johann has to craft her speech constantly, as Johann explains: one has to 'stay aware of what you want to say at any time and be able to put your point across in short 'six-minute' speeches'. However, the Labour Party tradition of public life and public speaking has not always necessarily been all that supportive to women. Many prominent male Labour politicians, perhaps especially in Scotland, have been accustomed to operating in dominantly male environments where gaining respect was in part about being 'hard' and frequently dismissive of women. This point is exemplified in recent press attention that was given to the foolish sexist comments made by MSP Frank McAvety about an 'attractive girl' sitting in the public benches. Picked up on a microphone, whilst he was chairing a Scottish parliament meeting in 2010, it was then broadcast through the nation's media for the general public to share.

For Johann a crucial point in construction of the new Parliament was the emphasis on fairness and gender balance, unfortunately historically lacking in Westminster. A key point that allowed this development of equality was the '50-50' campaign that aimed to ensure equality of representation by gender in the Scottish parliament. It is this structure that prompted the move for Johann herself into becoming an MSP. Johann admits at the time of these developments in Scottish politics when she was driven to campaign for ministerial position, it was not an easy time for her. At that moment Johann's two children were only 2 and 4 years of age with husband: Archie Graham working many hours himself as a local Glasgow City Councilor. Johann explains that it was necessary to take on this campaign to ensure not only equality for herself but equality for other women like herself: juggling work and motherhood. She continues to explain that if these changes can be made at societal level they will serve to improve lasting personal and social relationships in a deeper, wider context.

As the morning heat begins to build, so the sitting draws to a close with Johann penciled in for a day full of local meetings.

With family being a key subject for discussion during this interview, Johann closes the interview discussing her decision to take the role of MSP, which was a role that demanded the importance of sharing domestic/parental roles within their family context. For Johann this personal experience drives her forward in her belief in the importance of equality across the social spectrum: with the family being at the forefront. In essence for Johann it is the increase in female participation in politics, in Scotland and beyond that has redefined and justified its effectiveness. Greater female voice has focused attention on and is working to fix key societal issues such as child poverty, low pay and expectations for women and above all violence against women.

These are issues that Johann sees as fundamental problems to be tackled which under her representation she will aim to rectify.

Frances Robertson, 2011
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