

# **In Conversation with Jo Phillips, Scottish Green Candidate for Edinburgh South**

## **The Student**

I wanted to start with talking about your roots and your kind of personal connection to the environment and also politics. I know you come out from being a landscape architect and an urban designer, how has that shaped you and what's got you interested in taking the step into politics?

## **Jo Phillips**

Sure. So for many years, probably about 20 years, I've worked on onshore and offshore wind farms and I've felt that a really rewarding experience because over those decades, the transition from fossil fuels to renewables. Is really important and part of my job was really helping some of the big energy companies get consent for wind farms. So I've done that and I feel like the climate change crisis is worsening, that more needs to be done, and I felt an obligation to do more. So an e-mail came round from the Scottish Greens who would like to stand in Westminster election. I had probably quite marginal involvement in the Scottish Greens because I've been so busy with work, but I saw that as an opportunity and I felt like it was something I could really have a go at and make a difference so I kind of stepped up and said, yeah, I'd love to do that and I feel I've got transferable skills, but also it's just something I'm passionate about, something I believe in and I can use that passion and belief to good effect

## **The Student**

So you've had a long term history with like climate change and that movement?

## **Jo Phillips**

Yeah, I have. It's what drew me into doing landscape architecture in the 1st place. Just kind of a love of the natural environment and more recently I'm doing projects in regenerative farming and I love that large scale land use planning. So typically with landscape architects, we do quite small schemes and they'll probably have a very negligible difference in terms of reduction of greenhouse gas actions, but I'm doing a project for North Yorkshire County Council at the moment, which is 35,000 hectares across the county and then it's county owned land and they're looking to transform the way they farm to make it more environmentally friendly. So both through sequestering greenhouse gas gases but also increasing biodiversity. So that's the kind of thing I like kind of large scale stuff. We're making a difference working the landscape, landscape and restoration.

## **The Student**

I guess there's a link there to politics and making that kind of step up to political action on the ground.

## **Jo Phillips**

Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And very much about implementation and through the work I do here, it's about putting things on the ground. A lot of the Councils have an actual strategy and that was kind of their first step and it's kind of stalled and that's why there's very little progress because nobody's quite clear how to implement it. And it's an understanding of how you fund these projects. How do you release the funding to enable the implementation? But yeah, it's scaling things up so it's doing things at big scale, but also thinking logically how you use policy and put into practise.

## **The Student**

Interesting. I guess talking about policy, what are the Scottish Greens big goals around climate change?

## **Jo Phillips**

Yeah. What I would say in terms of climate change, one of the obvious things is no more drilling for oil and gas so we're kind of really clear in terms of the fossil fuels that that just has to stop and there is often question around about the renewable energy system and would that work? Would there not be gaps in the system? But there's examples in California is quite a good example which is almost 100% renewable where it can work and you need we need to upgrade the grid so that we've got a lot of grid capacity for the renewable projects to feed into and you also need to supplement that with battery storage. It's definitely manageable, it just needs a big investment in the grid, investment in battery storage and really kind of just rounding off the provision of renewable energy.

This kind of backward step to licencing oil and gas fields is not necessary and I appreciate there's a just transition issue in the North East of Scotland where that's been very much part of the economy, but I feel we are we can if again, if there's an investment to help workers within that area and transition into the green economy and then that would work effectively.

## **The Student**

I was going to say this is where you and the SNP have a division because the SNP would like to continue licencing. The trade union body offshore energy has said that will cost 42,000 jobs. How do you square the move towards green energy in these areas that are going to fall further behind because of that?

## **Jo Phillips**

What we'd say is with all the issues on the economy, you have to take a step back and the biggest threat to our economy is climate change. If we're looking for long term stability and prosperity, then we've got to get climate change under control. It's not going to be an easy path and it's going to be challenges. There will need to be transitioning of jobs and transitioning business and but there's no other future. There's only one direction we're going in and that has to be to solve climate chaos otherwise the expense is going to be unbelievable the further we kick that down the road, the more expensive it's going to get.

I was reading an article in The Economist the other day and they were saying. And essentially it's going to be like being at war. You know, if we get to like, 2°, all the surplus finance is going to be soaked up through the paying for the damage that climate change is causing.

## **The Student**

Labour is also taking steps around climate change with their GB energy company as well as investment in low carbon infrastructure. Why would a person vote for the Scottish Green Party when they can vote for labour, especially in a seat that labour are likely to win?

## **Jo Phillips**

What I would say was I was encouraged when Labour announced their 28 million green investment pledge. I thought it was a positive step. I was totally disappointed when they backed down on that. It was already probably half of what's needed to be spent so it was always inadequate and not even to be able to deliver on that was really disappointing.

I was at hustings on Thursday night and it was around peace, security and defence. Labour weren't representative there, but it was in the same week where Keir Starmer announced that he would be renewing Trident. OK, this is an out of date and ineffective. Defence system. The cost for renewal is 31 billion, so we can afford 31 billion on a defence system that hopefully we will never use if we use. It's going to wipe out millions of people and be totally devastating, so they're prepared to spend 31 billion on that, which has negative impacts for people and planet and yet they can't find that 28 million to tackle the worst challenge we've ever faced.

I just think Labour weak and OK, I agree with their plans for the grid and fully support making a headquarters in Scotland. I'm not going to oppose that in any way because I think that's a really positive thing and it's necessary but overall they're not doing enough and this is my real fear that they're going to step into government and they're going to not deliver on climate change because the priorities and funding are all wrong.

## **The Student**

You touched on Trident. Your party is against it and so are the SNP. How would you respond to people that say that that's a necessary deterrent to stop conflicts like the one in Ukraine extending further and a way of bringing peace and security to the World.

## **Jo Phillips**

It does not bring peace and security. It does the exact opposite; it makes us a target. In the lifetime of the Trident programme, it's going to cost 205 billion. That's a massive sum of money we could have made radical changes that would be really positive for both people and planet with that sum of money. It only makes us a target. It's an outdated system. It was designed really to respond to the Cold War where we had one distinct enemy. If you read into threats, security threats to our country, it's more about terrorism, really, than a nuclear threat, so. It's just a a huge waste of money.

## **The Student**

Building off that, you opposed NATO membership but the English and Welsh Green Party have watered down their commitment to completely rejecting NATO after the Ukraine invasion, do you still stand by that commitment?

## **Jo Phillips**

Yes, we do, yeah and we would sign the Treaty of Prohibition against Nuclear Weapons. There there's even a bit of a thought around what sparked the war in Ukraine and within our policy document, it might not be in our manifesto, I'm not sure, but it talks about no further eastern advancement of NATO and how that is sort of being seen as a threat to Russia.

## **The Student**

Switching onto student issues, with us as student paper, a recent NUS Scotland report said half of students skipped a meal and 45% have gone without heating. How would the Scottish Greens take tackle the cost of living crisis?

## **Jo Phillips**

Well, what we're proposing is a wealth tax. A lot of the political debate has been around income tax and this kind of commitment to not increase income tax and what we're saying is we're, we're more than happy to impose tax on the wealthiest in this country. That would raise an estimated 75 billion. And what the purpose of that is? We see there being greater social inequality than we've had since Victorian times. We've got levels of extreme wealth, but also levels of extreme poverty. You use The Students as an example,

we also have 25% of children in the UK who are living in poverty. So it's something that's sort of being pushed under the carpet as if these people don't matter. They're sort of marginalisation of lower income groups, of ethnic minorities, of anyone that's like slightly different.

We really want to make a society where everyone's included. Housing is a human right. That's there's a there's United Nations declaration that cites that as a human right. We recognise that there's housing crisis in Edinburgh. There's a housing emergency. It's affecting students, rent prices are escalating. So we're putting in place a rent cap to try and kind of control the rising prices of rent, also reducing short term rents so all the properties aren't soaked up by Airbnb, but there's actually properties for local people and students who have to be here. As well, we're kind of trying to give tenants better rights and making sure their houses are liveable, but also kind of coming back to the energy side once we've got more renewable energy efficiency and energy conservation, which is never talked about, because why would energy companies promote that because they'll be selling less and the government would be receiving less tax on that energy. But if you reduce the consumption of energy, it brings down costs and with that reduced demand, you can become renewable more easily because we do have the renewable infrastructure. It's all those things like cost of living, it's about the energy, but it's also about the provision of homes within the city and making sure everyone has warm, comfortable and liveable homes.

### **The Student**

How do the Scottish green parties square needing to build more houses, but also the fact that where those houses being built might be on green areas? Does that prevent you from achieving your goal of affordable housing?

### **Jo Phillips**

Yeah. What we would say is we would, it's almost like a bit of a hierarchy and we'd start by looking at buildings that are vacant and derelict, so houses that aren't currently used. It's not a huge proportion in terms of the need, but it'd be a start and it's about really investing in our existing urban areas to make sure they're liveable, we don't have properties that are vacant and unused. And then within that you can start to look at buildings that aren't specifically for housing but could be retrofitted, whether you have old warehouses or office buildings but making sure that they meet the correct standards. That's there to kind of consider.

There's the issue around 2nd. 3rd. 4th homes, where housing, its not only that it is a human right, but it's not a commodity. So it's being used for investment and that's wrong when some people in this city are homeless or we've got families living in temporary accommodation. It's recognising that let's just make sure everyone has one

home to start with. That's covered in a lot of areas by increasing council tax on second homes, it's this idea of reining in the extent of Airbnb by limiting short-term lets to help free up property. All those measures already give us a stock within the city. We've already got 20 minute neighbourhoods existing, we've already got a bus service, we've already got utilities.

OK, it might be an extra investment and not so tidy for a volume developer to have to do lots of retrofit and bits and pieces, but it helps to bring a city back to life or run down areas back to life. That's a start. We've got an area I live in where there's quite a lot of elderly couples living in big houses, so there's a job to be done on resizing and maybe giving retired couples or just people whose circumstances have changed opportunity to change into more suitable accommodation, either up or down the way, which hopefully would free up more family housing, which I think is the kind of big shortage in the city. We would get on to - if there's still a need - brownfield sites and then Greenfield.

### **The Student**

So staying on the topic of students, there's been a lot of talk recently about pressures on universities around student funding. I know in the last decade University Scotland have said there's been a funding cut 19% for Scottish students. The University of Edinburgh principal has said that there needs to be calm reconsideration of university funding in order to retain talent and money. How would the Scottish Greens handle this?

### **Jo Phillips**

For Scottish students, yeah, we'd look to retain free tuition fees. I think what is really important when we're thinking about that green economy and a couple of months ago, I was at Net Zero Projects, which was a conference at Dynamic Earth and I really enjoyed it because there were quite a few representatives and they were from startup tech companies or they had produced some innovative design for battery storage or something, something related to net zero and a lot of these companies and startups, small businesses had developed from Edinburgh University, or from universities across Scotland.

So if we're looking about that whole green economy and I know that's only kind of one part of the the university spectrum but just even in terms of that, how important the universities are in terms of the whole transition to net zero, to have that educational base to draw students into Scotland into Edinburgh and to encourage them to stay and to develop businesses that will support that kind of future economy, I think it's really important. So I think it's an investment for the future and I totally support the further education that Edinburgh University and other universities provide.

## **The Student**

Would you say the same about international students? I know the Conservative government in Westminster have been trying to crack down in order to bring down immigration figures. Are you against this?

## **Jo Phillips**

There's two things to say on this we, as the Scottish Greens, are positive about immigration. We think it's disgraceful the way that immigrants are treated. It's racist and they're not treated with dignity and respect. I want to say that that's kind of a really positive thing that we welcome immigrants into Scotland.

What I would say more from a kind of personal point of view when we're looking at climate change, that it doesn't make sense for students to be travelling hundreds of thousands of miles to come to university. Maybe there is a better way to bring our universities, you know, to set up universities, say in China or America and provide there because I think there's a huge carbon footprint associated with students moving across the world, you know, two or three times a year. So that's my concern, I love the fact that Edinburgh is so multicultural and diverse and I welcome people into the city. I'm pleased for that but my only concern would be the carbon footprint attached to all that travel and movement across the world.

## **The Student**

Even if that came at the expense of university funding, because at the moment they're very reliant on international student fees in order to maintain the domestic population of students?

## **Jo Phillips**

Yeah, I do appreciate that and I wonder, I know online we all kind of completely went off online everything after COVID but whether there was like for example if there was this idea to set up university provision in the main centres, which I believe are mostly kind of the United States and China, and whether that would be a more sustainable way and you would still get the fees but without there being the carbon footprint.

## **The Student**

I guess moving on again, you've called the situation going on in Gaza a genocide and the Scottish Greens were the first to call for a ceasefire. What moves do you think Westminster should make?

**Jo Phillips**

Economic sanctions, an embargo on arms and to come together and send out a really clear message to Israel that the war has to stop.

**The Student**

What's your opinion on divestment? There's an encampment at the University of Edinburgh with students wanting the university to divest, what's your view on this?

**Jo Phillips**

Complete divestment. It's all about people above profit and I have no qualms with that whatsoever, 100% supportive on divestment.

**The Student**

So back to Holyrood, the Scottish Greens coalition break down led to the empowerment of the socially conservative figures in the SNP, such as Kate Forbes. Are you concerned about the implications of this on social rights, such as access to abortion and trans rights?

**Jo Phillips**

No, I'm not. I'm not concerned because I think overall I think SNP's a broad church which often happens with an Independence Party where their main theme is independence. So inevitably you're going to have a political spectrum between left and right. I think overall the majority would still be supportive of, you know, protecting people's rights in those instances.

**The Student**

To kind of finish up. The Scottish Greens are fielding a record number of candidates, going to 44 from 19 last time. The chances of you winning this seat are low, but what do you hope to change with your campaign?

**Jo Phillips**

Every vote counts. The way we're going at it is, yeah, we might not win, but we want to win as many votes as we can and we want to send a clear message to our next government, which might well be labour, that climate change matters, that it's a real concern.

A lot of the statistics you read are 80% of people put it as their number one priority and that message doesn't really come through. Our voting system is not working, that people are unable to vote for the party, that they choose, that they're drawn into this tactical

voting. We're saying to people, yeah, Labour are likely to win South Edinburgh, but don't let that stop you voting Green. If you feel passionately about people and planet that you feel that we can do a whole lot better than labour because Labour are actually only marginally better than the Tories, that we're kind of heading for huge disappointment. That seems like the low expectation. Let's get the Tories out. Yeah, Labour will do that but we're selling ourselves short. We can do so much better.

We need to have a clear vision and cure. Starmer isn't providing us with that clear vision. We need progressive policies that set out a clear future. We're not burying our head in the sand about climate change, but we're accepting that climate change is the huge challenges we face. We're tackling those challenges in a really positive way and not only overcoming the issues, but using it to positive effect through creating jobs, creating a strong economy and starting to build a just transition towards a secure society that can deal with all this kind of future change.

### **The Student**

Is there anything else you'd like to say directly to students?

### **Jo Phillips**

I think what I would say – and possibly other people would say – is when you watch the news and you, you really have that thought, how could we let things get so bad? Like how can we have ended up in this situation? And I think I've given that some thought and it's the fact that we prioritise profit over planet, which has led to the all the taxes, tax breaks, the subsidies that have gone to the oil companies that mean we're continuing to increase our carbon footprint when we need to be reducing it.

It's the fact that we put profit over people, which is evident in our inability to call the ceasefire in the war for the war in Gaza, but also how we have a cost-of-living crisis with children in poverty and homelessness. We've got to question how that's all happened and it's that we've just not got priority in terms of what important for funding so we're spending money on all the wrong things.

With the Conservatives, when we go back about the past 14 years, Brexit is costing us 140 million a year in terms of loss, trade HS 2 costs 106 billion, and even the PPE scandal costs 8 billion. That's a massive amount of money. Let's dispel the myth that the tories are safe pair of hands when it comes to the economy and Labour really aren't an awful lot better with their commitment to Trident and their reluctance to scrap the two-child benefit CAP, which is pushing families into poverty and also their reluctance to tax the wealthy, which previously would have been very much the domain of labour, but they shy away from that.

I think where people are put off voting green is they think 'oh will be weak on the economy', but through avoiding the incompetency and misspending that the Tories were responsible for, being smarter on prioritising than Labour will be we've got a really strong case in terms of the economy on how we would fund a better country.

When you look at GDP overall, it flatlines at 0.1% - this was a report back in April-, when you break down the component parts of the economy, the one sector that's growing is the green economy, it's about 7.8%, something like that. That shows what we're proposing is actually a really strong plan in terms of this stability and prosperity for future economy.