

In conversation with Tommy Sheppard, SNP candidate for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh

The Student

So just to kind of start, you've been an MP for a decade. This is your 4th election. What motivated you to run again?

Tommy Sheppard

Yeah, nine years, to be precise, Jack that's. It's not over state it. It does sometimes feel like longer, so yes, this is my 4th election. You're quite right, I think then the main reason that attracts me is because I sense an opportunity for change and an opportunity to pursue what I believe in, in a way that hasn't been there under Tory majority governments at Westminster. You know, I think the dogs in the street know that Labour are going to win the next election and Keir Starmer is going to be Prime Minister. They are so far ahead in England that that, you know he can't not. I mean it would take a remarkable achievement for him to lose this election now, I think being 20 points ahead with three weeks to go.

So let's assume that Kier Starmer is gonna be Prime Minister and there's gonna be a Labour government. There has never been a situation in history where there's been a Labour government in London without a mandate in Scotland and I am therefore keen to seek a mandate in Scotland, for Scotland to have more control over its own affairs and to take further steps along the route to becoming an independent country. And I believe that the dynamic in doing that question at Westminster will be different under a Labour administration than it has been under a Tory administration and that there are many people inside the Labour Party in England who will respond favourably if they see that that is where Scottish public opinion is and what the people of Scotland actually want and they won't be as dismissive and disrespectful as the Conservatives have been.

So that's one big thing that that attracts me about a dynamic political situation will be fundamentally different than it has been in the past. While we're pursuing that argument, of course there will be other things to do and other issues to fight, and I suppose what I'm saying to people in this area is that Kier Starmer doesn't need Scotland. He doesn't need the votes of the people living here to become Prime Minister. So the main question for us is who's going to provide a Scottish voice to this new government in Westminster? Who is going to speak up for our interests here? And if you like, try and press Keir Starmer to be a little bit more different from the Tories than he says he's going to be at the moment. So that's sort of what I'm about. I'm trying to refresh a mandate for the journey to Scotland becoming an independent country but doing that not because of an abstract constitutional point, but because I believe that by doing that, we can deal with some of the major social and economic crises that are affecting people here and along the way to doing that to try and push the Labour government to be more like a Labour government of the past rather than a Tory government of the future.

The Student

I guess you talk about a Labour government of the past. You left Labour in 2003 when it distanced itself from its socialist roots under Blair. We're seeing the party return to the more Blairite version of Labour. How did you view that shift?

Tommy Sheppard

I mean to be true, I think storm is worse than Blair. You know, I mean I was in the Labour Party in the mid 90s when you know, Blair took over and New Labour came about and I was uneasy about that but in truth there were a number of things they were saying, you know, such as Gordon Brown's new proposals on working family's tax credits, Robin Cook's proposals on an ethical foreign policy, John Prescott talking about regional government and constitutional reform. There was a there was a lot of meat there that added up to an alternative worldview from the John Major government of the Conservatives. You don't see that now.

In fact, you see Labour spokespeople, people trying to go out of their way to reassure conservative voters that their instincts and their beliefs are safe in the hands of Kier Starmer. I mean, this has been an exercise in trying to win over conservative voters not by persuading them to adopt a different view, but by claiming that the Labour Party has adopted their view. And it's really quite depressing in some ways, which is why I'm very glad that in Scotland we have the opportunity to make other choices. You know, I would feel pretty depressed at the minute if I was in a in this contest in in England or if I was a labour voter in this contest in England thinking what on Earth is going on? So that's why I hope that in the new Parliament there will be people, you know, there will be some people from the labour left, although they're doing their best to fillet them out of the party, there will be some Green MPs, I hope there will be hopefully a good balance of people from the SNP.

We will be, we will be the voices in the new Parliament that are trying to say to Keir Starmer it's not enough just to inherit and continue with the policies of the Tories because these have been rejected by people and they're killing people and we need to do it differently. So you can't just say that this, you know, what is it? £18/20 billion of cuts that are baked into the Tory plans according to the Institute for Financial Studies, you can't say, as Rachel Reed says, that that's OK and we'll just continue with that. Because that's going to mean really severe pressure on public services that are already overstretched and can barely cope. So that's not what people expect from a Labour government. And if they don't change their mind on that, then I think their hymens will be very, very short indeed. And it will be a bitter harvest that will be reaped.

The Student

I mean, you talk about the SNP countering Labour but recent polling has shown Labour overtake the SNP for the first time since the independence referendum. How do you plan to win back voters who've been disillusioned by recent developments in the SNP?

Tommy Sheppard

Yeah, I mean I think to be fair, recent polling has shown us drawing neck and neck. I mean there's a there's a clutch of polls since the election was called that pretty much say it's too close to call and because of the vagaries of the first past the post system we have a whole bunch of seats, particularly in Central Scotland where 2% either way could see one party winning all or winning none and hint.

Really it's an election in which the outcome is less predictable in Scotland than it has been for a very long time and certainly the SNP are under more challenge than we've been for quite some time and this is probably the most difficult of the four elections that I've fought and I know that and I'm you know, I'm not therefore taking anything for granted and we're fighting this, this like a marginal and going very hard for every for every vote.

To answer your question, I think there's a there's a range of factors at play. I think there is just an overwhelming desire here for people to see the back of the Tories. They you know they just want them gone and some people are almost saying they don't care what replaces them, just getting rid of them would be enough in itself and anything will do as long as it's not Tories. So obviously and that part of the biggest part of Labour's message that we're not these guys. People are being seduced by that argument. The SNP need to try and argue with people that actually you can be anti Tory in a number of different ways.

I mean, I've been fighting the Tories in Parliament for the last nine years. I've voted against them more times than the Labour Party has and I will continue to do so. I would never ever support a Conservative minister administration in the in the House of Commons. We need to tell people that that their anti-Tory vote is safe in the SNP hands, in fact, it's probably better. Rather than just give Keir Starmer a blank cheque and increase his majority even further, it's better there are people in there with an independent mind, an independent voice who will hold Kier Starmer and his new government to account and try and persuade them to be a little bit more radical, a little bit more different from what they are replacing.

And that that, I mean that's the battle, that is the argument that's now live and in play across the doorsteps and households of Edinburgh.

The Student

This is a big period of change for the SNP with the resignation of Humza Yousaf and it feels like there's maybe a more cautious approach being taken. Do you think this could come at the expense of issues that are more popular among students, such as the socially liberal policies of his predecessors?

Tommy Sheppard

No, I don't think so. I mean, look, I think this has been a very difficult 18 months for the SNP, the most difficult since since I joined the party 10 years ago so. There's no point kidding ourselves now, it's been it's been a difficult time, and that undoubtedly has cost support and I and of course our opponents have tried to turbocharge the slightest difficulties and amplify them as much as they possibly can for their own political advantage.

But, you know, the party has come back together now under John Swinney, who is leading the party from a left of centre position, but it's still trying to command a broad section of Scottish opinion from the centre left and I think that is an attractive message for young people because you know we're arguing, not just we, I suppose ourselves, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats are all arguing for a just transition away from oil and gas to renewables. The difference with the SNP is that we are arguing that the state should invest in this, the state should fund it and

actively make it happen so that the people who are currently working in the North Sea oil and gas are retrained and reskilled and put into high quality jobs in in the renewable industry. We're not just you know coming back and waiting for it to happen or placing our reliance on the private sector.

Also if you look at housing, which is a major issue, we need to be building much more affordable housing than we are but the reality is that the Scottish Government's capital funds have been cut by 16% this year by the Westminster Government. And they're going to be cut even more and that means that the money's not there to do this, it's not there to actually build new health facilities as well so we need that policy changed. Labour needs to change that policy, but they're saying they won't so unless we get people into the Parliament to argue with them, things are not going to change and we're not going to build more affordable houses.

So these are big picture things that I think young people will respond to, and then when you look at other things like international affairs, I mean I think the you know so many, I mean, well, so many people generally, but young people in particular are animated about what's going on in the Middle East and the plight of the Palestinian people and Labour has been, you know, well, it has been dragged to a better position, I suppose, over time. But it was very, very slow to try and advocate for human rights in, in, in Gaza and to call out some of the breaches of international law that were happening, happening at the hands of the Israeli Government. The SNP has been quick to do that and has led from the front on building solidarity with the Palestinian people and we will be pressing the new government to recognise Palestine as one of the first international actions that it does to accelerate a new peace process in the Middle East. So you know, I don't think you could accuse us of being cautious. I mean we're focused certainly and we're prioritising stuff, but I think our message is still one that's very attractive to anyone who aspires to change the world in which they live.

The Student

You've raised a couple of points I'd probably like to go into a bit further you. You talked about the SNP being at the forefront of climate change policy, but you've received criticism about plans to renew new oil and gas licenses...

Tommy Sheppard

Well, I'm...I'm not sure...I don't know what you mean by received criticism but just to be clear on what our policy is.

The Student

I've spoken to the Greens and people who have said, well, Labour as well have criticised you because they wouldn't do the same.

Tommy Sheppard

OK, well I mean this is just quite shocking from labour. The SNP voted in Parliament against the Rosebank licence, for example, as did Labour, but Labour's view and their policy is that any licences that were already issued by the UK Government, they would not rescind that. That is what Keir Starmer said. And that means that Rosebank is OK for the Labour Party, having been approved by the Tory government, they're going to continue with it. It's not OK with us, but the problem is that this whole matter of oil and gas licencing is reserved to Westminster. The Scottish

Government, the SNP government has got no actual say in this. I mean it it can express an opinion, it can try and advocate and argue, but it doesn't have any legislative competence to issue these licences or to rescind them - it ought to have, but it doesn't. OK, so our policy and we, you know, we're consulting us at the minute is that there must be a managed decline in oil and gas in the North Sea and that means that any new proposals for any new exploration or extraction have to be matched against a set of net zero climate criteria, and only if they're compatible with that would the licence be issued. The presumption would be that the licence would not be issued. Now, until the election was called, there was a live public consultation on those proposals, including the presumption against new oil and gas drilling. That's been suspended because the election has been called, but that's where the SNP is. So it's really disingenuous for people to try and accuse us of, you know of you know, being pro-new drilling or whatever, I mean it's the Labour Party that wants to go ahead with Rosebank we don't.

The Student

Would. So more recently, and this is the Scottish Parliament, they've scrapped their annual targets for net zero and then doing it more long term. I guess that could be seen as an example of you maybe being over optimistic even about your plans on climate change and not being able to actually see them through, I guess how would you respond to that?

Tommy Sheppard

OK, when you use the word scratch as a verb as if like, people actively wanted to do this. I think that is the wrong way to put it the truth is that that the government has acknowledged that it's simply not going to happen on current projections, that they're targets that were set that are not going to be achieved and there comes a point where you just look completely stupid if you have a policy that says we're going to do this and you and it's clear to everybody that you're not going to get anywhere near it. So it's better to actually acknowledge the truth and say what is actually happening and try and recalibrate those targets so that we can go ahead with ones that are actually achievable.

But I mean, I agree with something I think it was Patrick Hardy actually said that you know we need to spend less time talking about targets and more time just getting on with the job of reducing carbon, that's what we need to do and we seem to expend an awful lot of energy thinking about, you know, targets for each particular year. The truth is we need to go as fast as we can and as hard as we can and do as much as we can in any given period of time.

The Student

You spoke about housing and I guess that also ties in with the cost of living crisis and an NUS Scotland report found that half of students skipped a meal because of lack of money and a third were unable to pay rent in full. How would the SNP in Westminster tackle the cost of living crisis?

Tommy Sheppard

Well, we try and stop it from getting any worse is the most immediate thing, because as I say there are cuts already baked into the pipeline in public funding that we need to try and get changed. But you know, the SNP government in Scotland has done a

number of things to try and make life a little bit easier for young people. I mean that obviously there's the fact that people aren't running up the debts for tuition fees in Scotland that that English students are. But in other ways as well, like free bus travel for people under 22, trying to drive forward wage increases and the adoption of the real living wage across different sectors of the economy, although again that is not something we have any statutory responsibility for and I would like to see that we did have and you know trying to push forward in a number of other fronts.

But the biggest things that we that we ought to be doing, the power rests at Westminster, we ought to have a system of support for energy bills in this country. We ought to have social tariffs, for example, where people on low incomes are not charged the same extent as those on higher average incomes are, and we ought to have more active support for young people. But you know, I'm afraid that that requires big changes at Westminster and it does worry me actually, the lack of ambition of the Labour Party, because that will be what the programme of the New Labour Government will be, that it's not actually saying very much at all. I'm not even sure if they're saying that they would have a statutory minimum wage at the level of the real living wage that would apply to everyone over the age of 16, which is the SNP's policy. I think they're now talking about that coming in at 21, which of course will be, you know, most students are younger than 21.

The Student

I guess, I mean, you talk about students and university funding, the Conservative government in Westminster have been trying to crack down on international students to bring down immigration figures. But I guess there's an issue around that of the university sector being dependent on these international students for funding, I guess I just kind of wanted to get a sense of your thoughts on that issue?

Tommy Sheppard

Well, so. So I mean I'm very much in favour of international students, but I do think there needs to be a balance struck between, you know, the extent to which our university network provide a service for people who live in Scotland compared to they provide a service for people who want to come and visit. You're right about what the Tories are doing in terms of cracking down, which is, I mean, to be honest, I don't understand why people who come here to study for between one and three years, why they're even part of the immigration statistics at all. You know, they're not people who are coming to apply for citizenship or to make their life here and never go back home. They're coming temporarily for a purpose and I don't think overseas students should actually be included in the migration figures, I think that's pretty ridiculous, to be honest, but they are and the Tory government are trying to to make life harder for them so I think we need to resist that.

We need to try and make sure that our education system is open so that the best in the world can come and study here and that skills and experience and knowledge can be shared across countries. That seems to me to be an eminently good thing. And of course, we have three of the top 100 universities in the world in Scotland so I mean our universities probably punch above their weight, they have an international reputation that people respect and that is a very strong asset for Scotland, which we should be proud of and which we should promote.

The Student

I think I've heard you talk before about the impact of purpose-built student accommodation on perpetuating the housing crisis in the city. How would - and I know this is largely down to the Scottish Government in Holyrood - but how could you see the housing crisis in the city be if not resolved, improved?

Tommy Sheppard

So I mean, I have objected now to pretty much every application for purpose-built student accommodation in my constituency, certainly for the last five years. I would much rather see the very limited number of development sites which are available, you know, because there's not much land in this city, I would much rather see those used for the development of affordable social housing for people, including students, to be able to live in and rent at affordable rents OK.

The problem with purpose-built student accommodation and the way in which it's been developed is that it really benefits no one, it doesn't benefit students who need accommodation, because there's no way they could afford the astronomical fees that are being charged. It is, to be honest an exercise in ripping off those who can afford it particularly foreign students who come here and are paying astronomical rents in some instances and it's unfair to everyone. So I think that you know instead of viewing students as people who have to live in sort of purpose-built patches, students are people, so they're part of the community. It used to be that 3-4 or five students would come together and rent a flat and live like other people, you know, why do they have to be contained in these purpose-built sort of, you know battery accommodation. It's ridiculous and as well as ripping people off it separates students from the communities in which they live and I can't see that that's good for either side of that equation, to be honest.

The Student

I guess this is a bit of a pivot, but it fits in with the stuff you've touched upon already. The SNP have long been calling for a ceasefire in Gaza. What would – because obviously the SNP are not going to be the largest party - what would you like to see the incoming Westminster government do in relation to the conflict?

Tommy Sheppard

First of all, call for a call for a ceasefire and instruct our our representatives the UN, to to actively engage and press for that. And secondly to uh, recognise the state of Palestine so that they are, you know, they have equal legitimacy in any discussions which happen going forward. Thirdly, encourage under the UN auspices, a new brokerage of talks aimed at a lasting peace and having a two state solution in the Middle East with a secure Palestine and a secure Israel based on the 1967 borders, that's what I'd like to see. I think actually that in the new parliament, assuming the Tories do very badly and labour do quite well in England. I think we ought to be confident of having a majority viewpoint in that Parliament for that case and the fact that, you know, Spain and Ireland and others are taking this approach shows the path that we need to follow.

The Student

I guess you're probably not able to talk about individual cases, but on the university campus there's been large calls for divestment. How do you feel about the divestment movement more widely, I guess?

Tommy Sheppard

Well, I think I think divestment, you know, boycotting sanctions and divestment are all legitimate leverage that individuals can take, that institutions and governments can take. I, you know, I think it is it's a laudable aim. The objective of it ought to be to try and secure a policy change so you know, I don't know if the university does have association with armaments companies or whatever, but if it did, then the pressure would be to say, well, hold on, we should suspend arms sales to Israel and if you could, if you could use that association to get that policy change, that would be as good as just saying, well, we're walking away from this and not having anything to do with it. So sometimes the fact that, you know, we live in a complicated world and there's all sorts of relationships in a capitalist economy sometimes it might be possible to use that leverage to achieve a policy end, but if it's not, and if you're being met with resistance from that by a particular arms manufacturer, so then I think the case is pretty compelling for an institution like a university not to be associated with it.

The Student

I think in the university's case it's about divestment from companies like Amazon and Google, who provide AI cloud services to the Israeli state and the Israeli military.

You're the Scottish National Party so independence is at the forefront. Alba released a press release, which you probably have your own opinions on, criticising you for not referencing independence on your ballot paper, would you say the SNP is still as strongly committed to independence as they've previously been or would you say its on the backburner?

Tommy Sheppard

Yeah, I would, yes, and you know page one, line one of our manifesto will be that Scotland should be an independent country and what we are asking people to do at this election is to give us a mandate to argue that objective and to pursue that, that, that route. But whilst we're doing that, we also want immediate action to try and make things better for people in Scotland, by obliging and pressuring a new incoming government to reverse the public sector cuts that are planned and to take radical action to tackle the cost of living and to achieve climate justice and to operate to operate a better international policy including, by the way, and we've not talked about this, trying to improve relations with the European Union. It looks now that independence is probably the only route back to becoming a member of the European Union because all the Westminster parties are set against it, but at least the UK government could have a better relationship than the hostile one that the Tories have developed.

The Student

We've not got much time left, what is your overall message that you'd like to send to student voters?

Tommy Sheppard

Well, I think there's going to be a change of government in the UK. The question for everyone is, will that actually make any difference and to ensure that it makes a difference? Don't give Kier Starmer a blank cheque, put people into that new parliament who will hold them to account. Keep him on his toes and try and force him to be a little bit more radical and a little bit more different from the Tories that he's taking over from.

The Student

Just to finish off, kind of reflecting on your time as a MP, what would you say is your biggest achievement?

Tommy Sheppard

I mean, well, as an opposition MP, you don't you don't get that many achievements in the parliament itself but I mean I suppose one of the things that I'm pleased about is that the work I've done over the years on drug policy reform has, you know, changed attitudes and has changed, uh hasn't yet changed policy, but it has pressed the UK government to a position where it has at least stopped opposing the NHS Scotland taking initiatives to try and help people who are dependent on drugs, which is now happening in Glasgow, for example, with a safe consumption room that's being. We've fought for many years to allow that to happen, even though we don't have control in Scotland over the legislative framework of drug control and to actually through the health service to provide better care and stop stigmatising users and try and give them a place where they can take their drugs safely and where medical intervention is available in case something goes wrong, which is the way in the short term to try and rapidly bring down the number of drug deaths that we have in the country, most of which take place behind closed doors where individuals don't have anyone to help them or any ability to call for help because by the time they the toxins have kicked in, it's too late to actually respond. So that's movement, that's a sense of achievement.

But I think more than that, probably the thing that's been most the thing that keeps you going, the thing that's makes this worthwhile. Is that we spend an awful lot of time taking up individual cases and advocating for people who have a particular problem, maybe with a visa, or maybe with their Department of Work and Pensions, or it could be driving licences, it could be all sorts of things to do with the UK Government and we get results for people, not all the time, in fact, not even a majority of time, but in a significant number of cases, we actually get a result that makes life better for the individual. And yeah, that would not have happened had the intervention not been there so that sort of makes you feel that it's worthwhile.

The Student

Well, thanks for taking the time to kind of speak with us. I know you're probably quite busy, but yeah, thank you.