

In conversation with Ian Murray, Scottish Labour candidate for Edinburgh South

The Student

Let's just start by talking about your kind of journey over the last few years. You became Edinburgh South's MP in 2010. During that time you nearly defected to Change UK under Jeremy Corbyn and for a second you were Labour only Scottish MP.

How do you reflect on the change that your party's gone under in the last few years and specifically under Starmer?

Ian Murray

Yeah, I mean the, the, the, the bottom line is that when we came out of the 2019 General Election, which was our worst election defeat since 1935 so our arguably our worst election defeat ever.

We were faced with a set of circumstances of change or die. And Keir Starmer came in and Anas Sarwar came into the Scottish party and said, look, we can't blame the voters like some parts of the political establishment always want to do. We've got to reflect on the fact that people didn't want to vote Labour for a whole host of reasons, change the party and make us electable again.

And I think, you know, if anybody had said four years ago would be in the position that we are in at the moment, a few days, literally a few days before Election Day, we wouldn't have thought it was possible, but I think it shows you how far we've come and how far we've come to meet the voters, where they are on a whole host of issues and then you know, if we're lucky enough to form the government next week, we can then start changing some of the narrative on some of these big issues and start governing in national interest, which is a hugely important thing for the party, for the country, and indeed one of Kier's main talking points in terms of he wants to try and achieve.

In terms of the final answer to that question is that we knew we had to change the party to give us the opportunity to change the country and and and there was no we we had to win. There was no, no alternative come this election in 2024 to kick out this Conservative government and win the country. And that's what we've been working towards the last four years.

The Student

I should say you've spoken about Kier Starmer transformed the party. You were critical of Corbyn for breaking up the 'board church' of the Labour party and kind of removing people who didn't agree with him. How do you respond to people who might draw

similarities between that and some of the issues around candidate selection with Kier trying to bolster the center-right faction in the Labour Party at the expense of those on the left?

Ian Murray

Well, I, I mean, I don't. I think that the outcome of that is rather selective because what people didn't see was a lot of candidates in the run up to the election...essentially the process what happens is when the National Executive Committee – which is the ruling committee of the Labour Party – in the run up to an election, particularly when it's a surprise election like that they had to take control of selections. Now if you don't abide by the rules of the National Executive Committee for any MP or candidate, you're unable to stand and what people didn't quite see or didn't appreciate was the number of candidates right across the political spectrum that were denied the ability to stand, one being Graham Jones in Hyndburn, who certainly from the centre right of the party if you want to draw that political spectrum. And there were candidates all over the country that did that as well.

So people focused on one or two in terms of candidates, they weren't able to stand actually it wasn't about factions or left or right. It was just about the most appropriate people that were able to abide by the rules and those that didn't abide by the rules and were subsequently removed from being candidates. And that's a clear thing that parties do and they should do more of it, in fact, because it's we've got to make sure our candidates are properly vetted, they abide by the rules and values of the party and divide by rules. And the values of the election, the Electoral Commission and you can see that from the gambling scandal that we're currently enveloped in across the whole of the country that some of these candidates haven't even been abiding by the law.

The Student

I guess this is a bit of a shift away from that, but an NUS Scotland report found that over half of the students had skipped a meal, a third one able to pay their rent in full. How would the Labour Party tackle the cost of urban crisis?

Ian Murray

Well, actually this is something I've been speaking to and involved with, with students for the last two years, if not longer. Certainly maybe in the last 15 years of being an MP and also I was an alumni of Edinburgh university myself. This has always been an issue, but it's now post COVID has come into sharp contrast with previous times because of the sheer scale of the cost of living crisis and the costs for students in a city like Edinburgh, whether it be housing, whether it be energy bills, whether it be short term contracts, whether it be lack of wages.

So there's two big things in terms of how we deal with the cost of living crisis. Firstly, we've got to get energy bills down. I would refer all of your readers to the GB energy policy, the Green prosperity plan, which is about trying to get clean energy by 2030. That will permanently lower bills. That will mean, sure, we've got energy security, it provides some careers of the future for current students and future students hopefully. So that's one of the big things about the cost of living crisis.

The housing cost crisis is a huge problem for cities like Edinburgh. Obviously, it's completely devolved to the Scottish Parliament and therefore housing won't appear as a major issue in Scotland at this election. But the key thing is we have a housing crisis in Edinburgh that's been declared officially by the Council. I think 16 councils across Scotland have now declared a housing emergency. The Scottish Government have done so themselves and at the same time as slashing the housing budget. But we have to build more and we've committed across the UK – not in Scotland because it's devolved – to building more than a half million new homes, to have support for first time buyers because until you build your way out of this crisis of housing cost, it's only going to get worse.

If you essentially have housing policy at the moment that robs Peter to Rob Paul and all that does is push up prices and push up the cost of living for students in particular who's who are on short term lets and competing for an ever decreasing number of properties that are getting ever more expensive. So the housing issue, the cost of living issue in terms of energy, I've always said that we should be examining if students in cities like Edinburgh should get a weighting on their support, like a London weighting that we've had for some time to help with the costs of particular costs of cities.

And then on the other side, it's about earnings. So our new deal for working people will mean that we take away for the first time the age discrimination in terms of a genuine living wage. So whether you're 18,19, 24, or 55, you'll be earning the same and not lower and that'll be a huge fundamental thing in terms of student earnings for part time jobs and that kind of support. So there's lots of things there on the cost side, but also on the earnings side that we may that we'll be able to help with and that new deal for working people will be through in the first 100 days or brought as a piece of legislation in the first 100 days of the next Labour government. So before students go back in September, hopefully that legislation should be going through the parliamentary process.

The Student

You spoke there a bit about energy prices and your green plans. Rachel Reeves has scrapped your 28 billion green investment pledge. How would you respond to people who say that this means you're scaling back on your plans and not doing what's needed to tackle the severity of the crisis?

Ian Murray

OK. Well, let me be very clear on this and underline this point three times. There's been no change to the policy. The policy is still the clean energy by 2030 and a national wealth fund that allows us to invest in the port infrastructure and green steel and hydrogen and a £7.3 billion capitalization of GB energy, which will bring routes to market, it will fund fledgling technologies that will provide a publicly owned input into investments in renewables and therefore the public will own it, and if public money goes in, taxpayers money will be coming back out in terms of the contribution that gives.

So there's been no change in the policy underlying that three or four times the 28 billion was a figure for in different times from three years ago that was seeking a policy. We now have a policy that's got a figure on it, so there's been no scaling back of the green prosperity plan. Our opponents say there has, and of course, they've now said they would spend 28 billion because they can. And I also, you know, have to emphasise what the Institute for Fiscal Studies said last week on smaller party and third party manifestos that they are creating a poison in politics by promising stuff that they know they can't deliver. And that's meaning the political debate is not on the issues that matter, but on figures that are being dreamed up by others in order to attack other people's policies. But, you know, I cannot say and emphasise enough the policy for a green prosperity plan has not changed. It has remained the same. But the funding of it has changed because we know there's more private investment that can come in and our national wealth fund will leaver in three to one.

The Student

This is a bit of a change, but the university sector is largely dependent on international students for funding, but recent attempts by the Conservative government has tried to clamp down on international students to bring down immigration numbers. Would the Labour Party continue these policies and how would they tackle the funding issues that many universities are facing?

Ian Murray

Well, look, universities have had this funding issue for a problem because they're under funded public institutions and therefore they've tried to balance their funding with international students who are paying 20 odd thousand pounds per year in order to attend. So you've then got a scenario that goes back to your first question, that if you've got 50,000 students or more than 50,000 students at a university like Edinburgh you've then got to make sure that you're balancing the books and therefore most of those students are now coming from overseas. Then they've got to have somewhere to live, which pushes up prices for everyone, which means the cost of living crisis for students gets worse so the entire funding model for universities is broken. And just because tuition fees in Scotland are free doesn't make them free because there's a limit in the

number of places and of course because they're underfunded, there's much, much greater pressure on universities to bring in inform students so that that, that debate about how you fund higher education right across the UK but in a Scottish context has got to happen Michael Marra MSP, who's a spokesperson for finance on these issues, tried to start the debate three months ago and was shut down on the basis that the opposition. Had declared that all they wanted to do was to charge students for their education, which wasn't the case. We've got to have a serious debate about how we fund higher education. Otherwise the funding model which nearly broke universities over COVID because former students weren't coming, will have a serious severe and significant impact on our universities and on students for generations. Come if we if we know the problem for much longer.

The Student

There's again another shift, but the University of Edinburgh is dealing with its own calls for divestment the conflict in Gaza is a big issue for students. What steps would the Labour government take to tackle the conflict?

Ian Murray

Yet it's written in black and white in our manifesto so that it's in four parts. The first part is the immediate crisis that we have at the moment. We have to find a mechanism to get that immediate ceasefire that's going to take some time, because obviously there's negotiation still going on in Qatar at the moment. I thought we were close last week to getting that that immediate ceasefire in place. That's still not happening yet, so a Labour government would take a very proactive role in getting there. That's the sort of first stage, the second stage beyond that is to get unfettered aid into Gaza get the hostages returned back to Israel, get and then a process towards the rebuilding towards a permanent peace. The third one is then to get to that permanent peace solution. How do you get a process together that allows this 100 year old conflict to come to an end with a pushful solution? That's about a two state solution. That's about recognition of Palestine and then the fourth thing is beyond that is how do you get the wider geopolitical things in the region sorted, which is obviously there's big plays between Iran, China, Russia, America, Europe, uh, the Arab states in the region, there's a bigger geopolitical thing to do there so there's four steps. They're all laid out in a manifesto that starts with trying to find a stop to this current conflict that's happening there at the moment. And then beyond that, how you get a process towards a permanent peace. A Labour government will play a very active role in this, unlike the current government who are saying essentially, just turn to the other cheek.

The Student

I guess you say the Labour Government would take an active role. The Labour Party took until February to call for an immediate ceasefire in comparison to the SNP and the

Scottish Greens and other parties, who called for one. Pretty quickly, how would you respond to people who say that the Labour Party have been slow, that they lag behind, and they're not on the front foot with the conflict?

Ian Murray

It was because at the start the way back in November, what we were trying to do was to back what was already in place. So what was on the cards at that particular moment in time? Excuse me, and what passed the UN in terms of a UN resolution was to get these humanitarian. Policies in place to allow you to get in to allow the injured to get out, to allow hostages and prisoner exchanges to be done, and to use that as a platform towards a more permanent peace and a permanent ceasefire. So what we were trying to do was to back the process. That was all currently in place. Now we did get that humanitarian pause. It didn't provide that platform towards a more sustainable. And long term ceasefire, it didn't provide that platform towards. A peaceful solution in place and therefore we move the position too well. If we can't get to that stage because both parties can't come together with the conditions on the ground, then we're gonna have to find a different way of doing this so we let's not underestimate the impact of and the historic scale of getting an immediate ceasefire motion through Parliament in February that was a hugely significant moment. I'm not quite so sure when the last time a Foreign policy change of government went through with the opposition having an amendment to a government motion in terms of a foreign policy issue. That's hugely significant.

We got that through and the biggest criticism of the Labour Party since certainly people that speak to me have been saying yes, but nothing's happened. Well, that was the whole point back in November of backing something that was on the table because it was easy enough to say immediate ceasefire, but getting that implemented in the conditions on the ground to make it happen were almost impossible to get to that stage. So it was an incremental way of trying to find the process to get to a ceasefire, but ultimately everybody wanted this to stop. They all wanted to stop the day before, not the day after. And that's what we were trying to do was to get it to stop. We weren't in government. We're not in government. And you know, when we get into government, if we're lucky enough to do so. We'll make sure that we will take a very, very active role in resolving a lot of the world's issues that are around at the moment and taking our historic responsibilities as a P5 member of the United Nations Security Council seriously to try and use that influence to help. We can't do much from the opposition benches, but try and cajole and persuade the government to do more than they actually did.

The Student

You mentioned doing more from off of the opposition benches. You are currently Shadow Secretary of State for Scotland. It's not unreasonable that you could become Secretary of State for Scotland. How would you ensure that Scotland is heard in Westminster and feels seen?

Ian Murray

Well, the choice for people at this election, the Scottish context is they've got two choices come the election. They can either on the one hand, they can essentially have a Scottish Labour MP in government in my own case, if we're lucky enough to be appointed, lucky enough to win round the cabinet table championing Scotland's voice. Doing great things with the Scotland Office in terms of being Scotland's window to the world and voice in the West. Or they can have an opposition MP sitting on the SNP benches shouting with placards.

Now I suggest that given what we've been through for the last 14 years, it's much better to have a Scottish Labour MP at the heart of the government making decisions in the interests of Scotland working with Scottish people and Scottish institutions and organisations then shouting. On the sidelines and that's the key choice here. We've had too much of protest and not enough of power and we need that power to be able to make change people's lives. And I want as many Scottish Labour MP's as I can have right on those government benches, not sitting on the opposition benches pretty much powerless.

The Student

One thing I've been hearing a lot is that the SNP and non Labour parties are needed to kind of hold a large Labour majority accountable. How would you respond to those people who say that?

Ian Murray

Well, well, three things you only get you only get a large Labour majority or a Labour government by voting for it. You can't vote for somebody else and just hope it happens and hope your neighbour does the right thing. So first if people want it, they have to vote for it.

Look, this is the Tory line. Ohh they're gonna get a large majority so you don't need to vote for them. That's a conservative centre right and political play that's happened in America. It's happened all across Europe when the right have won and be under no illusions that this works because people go. Yeah, you know what? I might just do this. I've been in Parliament for 14 years, sitting on the opposition benches. You can achieve absolutely nothing. Nothing of no. You can win the odd vote. You can change the. Piece of legislation with an amendment to a clause and a 150 clause bill, maybe if you're lucky.

So you cannot affect change unless you're actually in government. So the whole narrative that we should have a large SMP or green or Liberal Democrat people sitting on opposition benches. To hold Labour's feet to the fire, you don't get to hold Labour's feet to the fire until we can win. And of course, holding your feet to the fire doesn't do

anything whatsoever so you know, I don't agree with that. That's that's a centre right approach to try to hold on to elections when you think you're gonna win.

The bottom line is here that we've got to get the this across the line and when people are presented with their ballot paper not putting across in the labour box misses the opportunity to get rid of. This Tory government. And and that's the key message. We've got to get across between now and next Thursday otherwise we all sit on the opposition benches, with Rishi Sunak continuing as being Prime Minister and that's what we're desperately trying to avoid and what most Scots tell me they want to try and do to change the government.

The Student

You mentioned there not being able to achieve much on the opposition benches. I was wondering is there any one achievement that you're particularly proud of that you've achieved over your time as a MP?

Ian Murray

Yeah. I mean, a lot of the stuff that I did around Brexit, I'm very proud of. I was dubbed the Scotland's most pro EU MP, which was fantastic and we did a lot of control in the government and had there been slightly different circumstance, you might have got to a different place on that. But the thing I'm most proud of in terms of legislative changes, I managed to get the law change to allow charities to have gifted on cash donations and cash collections so you could only ever claim Gift Aid on direct debits or stuff that was coming directly from some bank accounts. So a lot of charities who raised their money through cash in buckets or cash collections weren't able to do so. We got the law changed. It was worth the £100 million to charities over the last 10 years, but actually it's now worth about a quarter of a billion because the limits have been changed from 5000 to 15,000 a year, so you can affect change but you know it's few and far between. You can only really affect change from government fundamental change from government and and you can see that over the last 14 years on the basis of the way this government has operated that yes, we may have been able to change the odd law. Here and there. But actually the overall thing has been a disaster and we've got to try and change that come Thursday the 4th of July.

The Student

I mean, I'll wrap it up and let you get back to campaigning, but what message would you like to send to student voters? Is there anything in particular you'd like to say directed at them?

Ian Murray

Well, yeah. I mean the fundamental message for student voters is that we're on your side. We want to make sure that there is the country's best days are ahead of it. We want to make sure that the careers, the jobs, the pay, the conditions that that they, they the all the, all the things that young people want are there for the future, buying a home, etcetera, that the economy is there for you to be able to play a significant role in and get a significant amount back out for that but in order to do that, they've got to vote for it.

We can't have a situation whereby people think my neighbour can vote for this, so the big the big four things is this is about your future. But the opportunity to deliver that future happens next Thursday and we need student voters as well as other voters to come and vote Labour in order for us to kick out. Government deliver Scottish Labour MP's at the heart of that government and therefore your voice at the heart of government rather than opposition. And thirdly, to deliver that change that they've all been talking about and that people are telling me they want change as well. So we can't you can't deliver change without being in government and you can't get into government, that people voting for it. So if you want that change. Put your cross in the box and we get to deliver that change come next Friday.