

# **In Conversation with Simita Kumar, SNP Candidate for Edinburgh South**

## **The Student**

OK. I just kind of wanted to start talking a bit about your background. You've just made the switch from being the first female leader of the SNP in the Edinburgh South group and you're the only ethnic minority councilor in Edinburgh. What made you switch from that to Westminster politics?

## **Simita Kumar**

So I've actually not made a switch, I have so sorry, just to clarify that statement. So I am the first woman leader for the SNP group in the Council and I am the first ethnic Minority in Edinburgh but actually it might also be across Scotland. Which is pretty remarkable, but also terrifying.

So, well, my council work is going to carry on the opportunity to actually represent constituents or more constituents at a different level is always going to be up in the cards. You know, that's something that I have signed up to so it's not really a switch. It's just trying to provide a better engagement or reach out to more constituents than, say, a councilor would. So not quite a switch, but also just to think on a bigger platform.

## **The Student**

I guess again talking about your background, I get the sense that – you've said before that you quite reluctantly entered politics having worked in the NHS – how has your background shaped you?

## **Simita Kumar**

Yeah, absolutely so I'm from Fiji and one of the things that, when you when you're in Fiji, whether you like it or not, you'll have to be political. There's been a lot of political upheaval in Fiji, and it sort of encouraged me, but also discouraged me from entering politics.

When I moved to Scotland as a young teen, I didn't quite know where I fit in, how I fit in, how my values and my principles aligned with a particular party and things like that. But one of the things I always knew from the very start is that I am somebody who works really well with people. I am very committed to the priorities of the working class, of the wider majority of people who are perhaps don't have the same equity of opportunities.

I am a Psychology graduate, I've done sort of my masters in health research, so I've always been sort of health inclined and I became active in politics, you know, after the

2014 referendum, but more so after. After just witnessing Nicola Sturgeon in that space and being able to identify a woman leader was really important. So I said I have been a reluctant politician because one of the first times that somebody had approached me to put in my application for a counsellor and I said actually no, I'm quite all right, thank you. Because I love being part of the NHS. It's something I'm quite passionate about and still will continue to be. But they sort of kept encouraging me, and I must have completed my application in the 11th hour believe it or not. But I was successful in my vetting, I was successful in different interviews and thankfully and very luckily I got selected by our local branch and lo and behold, we're 2 and a half years later and I've gone from somebody who very reluctantly, stood for a counsellor to become the group leader in the Council for SNP.

But my values have really shaped me. Like I said, I'm from Fiji. My grandparents, well, my grandmother had started education when she was, you know, very young, but her education was stopped because at that time they were, you know, there was a lot of poverty around, so she had to leave school because my great grandparents had prioritised her brother's education before hers. So there was a lot of that ideology that a woman's place is somewhere else that is not an education. So those things have really, like, stayed with me.

Both my mom and dad have come from very low socioeconomic backgrounds. I had one of the best childhoods, the most amazing supportive family and but I'm also cognizant that if I was in Fiji I wouldn't be able to like, go to university for example, because that's something my parents would not have been able to afford. As a family we were given a scholarship but in Fiji the way it works is you can only have like one scholarship per family so my eldest sister had got that and there was not a chance that I would be able to get that and not a chance that I would be able to study.

So those things really really impacted me but also in terms of when I moved to Scotland and identifying a party that I was very closely aligned with, my mind had automatically gone to Scottish Labour because the Labour Party is all around the world and that is a party that my mum and dad had supported when they were in Fiji, when they were able to vote. But I quickly realised that what the Labour Party was offering in Scotland was completely different and perhaps a little bit away from the values that I identified with and I found SNP to be more aligned with my values, but also the cause of independence.

My background is somebody who's ancestry has come about from different places because of colonialism and I really understand the value of independence, the value of freedom of movement. You know, you're coming from a university background. Tuition is free in Scotland but also understanding that with European Union came European Union funding and European research and again, freedom of movement, that we shouldn't be bound to one country, one idea, one place. And I think that's really shaped me and that's something I'm quite passionate about.

I think I'm not a career politician like I know that I will one day go back to the NHS because that's where my heart lies. But while I'm here, I'm going to use my platform to do good, I'm going to use my platform to influence, I'm going to use my platform to make change and create change and although I'm the first woman or the first woman of colour, I really don't want to pull the ladder behind me. I want to get as many people, regardless of your political background. I want to see as many women as possible as many diverse individuals as possible, and I don't mean just that, just in terms of race, we need more people who have physical disabilities, we need a lot more people who have learning disabilities in the Council and I know across different sort of different parliaments we are very bad at accommodating people from different learning backgrounds and that is not reflective of the population. So I want to I want to use my platform for good and yeah.

### **The Student**

I think you spoke a bit there about the link between universities and immigration. The Conservative government in Westminster has been trying to crack down on international students and tighten visa requirements to prevent them from coming. Obviously, the university sector is largely dependent on these students.

What are your thoughts on that kind of dilemma?

### **Simita Kumar**

Yeah, absolutely. So firstly, what an absurd idea in terms of, you know, making, uh, international students jump through hoops, like you said. They are bringing with them essential funding that is needed for universities, but also they're also bringing with them an exchange of ideas and knowledge not just from their perspective but from our perspective we are also learning from their experiences. You know Scotland and the rest of the UK we have and an older population, we do have an ageing population and in Scotland we need immigration. We need people to be able to come here and work here and live here, but also to recognize some of the sectors where we really need it.

You know, like I said before, I worked in the NHS, and I remember when straight after Brexit, sitting in one of our offices at the sick kids at that time. I remember having conversations with colleagues, who were making plans to go back to their home countries in Europe after staying here for about 15 to 20 years. Now, remember, they would have had absolute ability to stay behind and apply for different residencies, sectors to stay behind, but they didn't want to do that. They didn't want to give up their visa, not the visas or their passports and their citizenships, but they were contributing so much to our economy. They were paying their taxes, they were keeping our NHS running but we will be in a situation where it will impact on universities in terms of finances. It's already having an impact on our services. I think migrants are... Very

annoyingly, the rhetoric that's been in the media is, oh, look, migrants are taking our jobs. Actually, I remember someone saying you're most more likely to be treated in the NHS by a migrant than a migrant is going to steal your services, so it's a really, really deceptive rhetoric that has been perpetuated by the Conservative government. I totally don't believe in that. I think Scotland's a different place. Our values are different. We want to embrace change, and we want to have a future that is beneficial for our economy, but we also want to have good public services that are well funded and well-staffed. So we're here for immigration.

### **The Student**

I guess talking about the economy, the NUS Scotland found that I think it was 1/3 of students were unable to pay their rent in full and half had had to skip a meal due to lack of funds. How would the SNP tackle the cost of living crisis?

### **Simita Kumar**

Absolutely. That's such a such a huge question, actually, such a huge question. So there's so many things in there, right, so I'll take that in turn. So firstly and I want to put this quite quite clearly so. The cost of living crisis has come about from Tory mismanagement of public funds. There has been an increase in food prices and energy bills because of Brexit, yes, there's lots of wars happening and I acknowledge that. But Scotland is energy rich so we should not be paying higher prices for energy, but we do.

We are all experiencing higher cost of food because of Brexit, something again Scotland did not choose to do or happen, but also at the at the last spring statement, our capital funding was cut down, so our ability to...Housing is devolved, for example, but I think it was Wes Streeting who said, you know, all roads lead back to Westminster and it's so true. Even for devolved matters, it really, really impacts how much money we're getting from Westminster and at the forward spending plan conservatives had signed up to something like £18 billion of cuts, and Labour has said yes, we're going to agree to this and these are going to come. So looking at the budget potentials, we are going to get hit by a lot more cuts into our public sector. That's the the reason why I've made that comment around our students around cost of living. It's is going to get worse, in my mind, before it gets better.

Scotland has asked for much more devolved power, so we could make some of our own funding decisions. Now if you're in Scotland and you're a student we have a really good system in terms of, like I said, free tuition, which is really important. We have a lot more in terms of Social Security, our benefits are higher than any other place, in Scotland, but also in terms of hardship funds. I know from a Council level one of the things we've been doing and doing really well is making sure that our students have access to emergency

funds, to hardship funds and there are other support systems that are designed around the around the person.

Those things will really, really help, but also understanding about the short term, for example, short term lets have been you know in Edinburgh context, short term lets have been driving up rental prices. Like it was cheaper for me to eventually buy a flat than rent my flat because it was that much more expensive. So those are the things that actual, concrete things that we've been doing and are we'll continue to do to make sure that more funds are inject, be injected back into the economy and eventually help students. But things like the transit visa levy.

There are policies and structures to help our students. We value our students, and that is one thing. I hope that our policies and fiscal policies will, at the end of the day, help students as well.

### **The Student**

You talk about energy supplies there and Scotland being an energy-rich country. There's been a lot of conversation during this election cycle about the SNP not ruling out granting out new oil and gas licenses in the same way that labour and the Scottish Greens would.

I guess how do you square that with your quite pro-environmental stance. I guess you could understand why people would be critical of that

### **Simita Kumar**

Oh, absolutely. I can absolutely understand the arguments on all sides of that point. So one of the things that John Sweeney has said and he's, and he said that very, very sort of mindfully and carefully considered ways that we will give consideration on a case to case basis for licences. So, a lot of the economy in the Northeast is driven by the oil and gas industry, right? What the Scottish Government has done is they've said we recognise that we cannot rely on oil and gas, we have a firm commitment on renewable energies and that's where our focus should be. What it's doing though it's also recognising that there is a huge amount of workforce, huge amount of families, huge amount of income that is based on oil and gas. So one of the things they are doing is they have got a £500 million fund to help with families who are within those sectors where jobs are going to finish soon.

We are going to consider licences case by case, but in the meantime that those families are not forgotten about. So at the at the heart of it there are there is socialism at the heart of it, even if it doesn't always feel like it. But it also goes on to what our firm commitments were around climate emergency. You know, Scotland was the first country I believe to declare a climate emergency. So our firm commitment is still there, but what

we are trying to do is listen to the people, especially in northeast, who've said our livelihood also depends on this, but we recognise that there's a bigger question here about climate and climate emergencies.

And like I said, I'm from Fiji, I have unfortunately witnessed climate change firsthand. It's so so real to smaller islands in the South Pacific like Kiribati which is disappearing basically and the the you know in a couple of years the whole island would be under under the sea. And that's a frightening concept, a very frightening concept. But I am reassured in my chats with SNP and other officials. that we have not lost our eye on that, that climate change, well, we don't have a second planet. You know, we have to make an absolute investment. Yeah, it's the poorest who would suffer if we if we carry on like this.

### **The Student**

While we're talking at like a kind of global level. The SNPP were quite quick to call for a ceasefire. There's been divestment movements around the university, I guess kind of what are your feelings? What would you hope to happen in the Israel Gaza conflict?

### **Simita Kumar**

Yeah, absolutely. What a good question, what an important question actually. So one of the things that I am so pleased that the SNPP has done and done very well is to call for a ceasefire and call it for quite, quite quickly, a lot longer before any other party.

So the events of October [7]th cannot be cannot be ignored but what the international community or especially in the UK have largely ignored are events before October the [7]th. It is such a British problem because we drew a line on a map and divided the state and did not understand the full consequences of doing such things. So that's the first thing the people of Palestine have suffered not just since October [7]th, but well, well, well beyond it. It makes me actually really upset and really sad when we as a country as a society, can witness the deaths of thousands and thousands and thousands of innocent children. of innocent people and think you know what this is, OK, but this is essentially what UK is telling people in Palestine. Your deaths are OK, your children's deaths are OK. It's fine because Israel has a right to defend itself. That is completely wrong and it makes me so furious when I hear that.

So one of the things we've done is called for ceasefire. One of the things that I will personally do next week is at the City of Edinburgh Council. I'm bringing in a motion to say that we recognise Palestine as a state and I'm very happy to do that but also I think there's a bigger question about maintaining international aid. So under the Westminster government, the Tory government, they've basically put down the financial aid, so UN's direction was that we put the international aid to 0.7%, and that's one of our commitments that we will maintain that 0.7% because it's important. It's important to

do that. Responding to listen to the plight of people who are in these horrific situations and show solidarity as we've done for Ukraine.

### **The Student**

This is a bit of a shift but I saw I think it was maybe yesterday or the day before, it was announced there will be an investigation into the SNP's use of parliamentary financing for campaign activities centering around stamps.

There seems to be a sense in the polling that there's an air of distrust surrounding the SNP after a series of scandals like Nicola Sturgeon's party finances and stuff like that. Is that what you're picking up on the campaign trail? How do you think SNP can combat that narrative?

### **Simita Kumar**

Yeah, absolutely. It's amazing that people are not using the same narrative around the misuse of public funds of taxpayers fund by the Tory government, no one's talking about Michelle Mone. No one's talking about the level of contracts that were given to friends and family and fast tracked, and we're not talking about millions of pounds, we're talking about billions of pounds that was essentially wasted by the Tory government on PPE that could never be used. So I'm amazed that the media is picking up a story about postage, I actually saw the story, I don't know anything about it I have to say. But the first headline I saw was talking about postage stamps, there's a lot of hearsay in that and it's frankly frightening that...

### **The Student**

Well, there's WhatsApp messages.

### **Simita Kumar**

OK, but wasn't there WhatsApp messages for the PPI? Where's the WhatsApp messages and frankly, the public record around the mismanagement of billions of pounds on PPI.

My thing is all politicians, regardless of the parties you belong from, all need scrutiny, every single one of us. You know, we are elected to represent our constituents. We are holding office, we're accountable to taxpayers, and I think that's it. I get really, really annoyed about when it's different for SNP and it's different for every other party. That's the bit that really annoys me. So in terms of the internal party finances this absolutely infuriates me, that we are in a position that it did come up by there, but it's an active police investigation and that is by the point, but again, these were party finances, these are members, funds that were misused. This was something that, you know is quite internal. The postage stamps is literally that postage stamps versus the scrutiny that should have come for Conservative party, which did not happen.

I was at a hustings yesterday and I said this and I'll repeat this to you for you and the interview. I've said if you really want to know. To find out what a party's values are, and who really runs the party the best thing to do is look at Peoples Register of interest, the declarations of donations and you will know everything you need to know about our party. Follow the donations, because at the end of the day a lot of these things are economic. They are financial, and once you follow that, you'll get a better narrative. And I'll leave it there.

### **The Student**

I guess just to kind of finish up, what would be your overall message to students and why should they vote for the SNP over Labour in this seat?

### **Simita Kumar**

Yeah, absolutely. So one of the things that I have talked about is free tuition. We are so lucky in in Scotland to have free tuition. We are lucky to be advocating for a return back into the EU. These are the things that Labour has washed their hands off. They have absolutely said that they would not back a free tuition in universities. Kier Stramer has actually rolled back on his promises on that. And although we are currently in a place where we can offer free tuition, we can't guarantee we can safeguard this under the new incoming Labour government.

For students we hear the plight around, cost of living crisis. It's something that everyone is getting their head around, but it's also austerities that Labour has already signed up to. Don't forget that 18 billion that's coming our way and that can only be sort of sufficiently handled by a strong SNP cohort of MPs who are going to go in into Westminster and hold the Labour government to account because that's what we need, I mean. Westminster has a lot of flaws, but the biggest flaw they have is that they have first past the post system instead of a STV system as we do in Scotland. You would never allow a company to monopolise the situation. At Westminster, we're allowing a political party to monopolise the system. But this is what Scotland believes in. This is what I believe in, in terms of the SNP around our say in the government we want and the government we choose and I think This is why the SNP is a much stronger party, a much stronger party for young people, a much stronger party for the next generation and I truly believe that, you know we will achieve the things we need to not just improve the life of students, but the lives of all individuals under an SNP government than a Labour one.

### **The Student**

I'll let you get some water and, but thanks for speaking to us.