



General Election Hustings

Friday 10th April

**Hilton Grosvenor Hotel,
Glasgow**

This event provided women with a safe, secure and, friendly space to discuss matters which are important to them. The representatives today have been invited to speak to women about what their political party is doing for women – what are their key priorities for the majority of the voters, the people who make the key decisions in the household and in the community. 100 years ago women were still dying in their fight to get the vote in the UK. They believed that women were equal to men. It is because of them that you have the vote today.

Agnes Tolmie
Chair, SWC

Introduction

This event was organised to give women an opportunity to listen to presentations from the six main political parties in Scotland. The audience were then invited to ask questions of the speakers in relation to key reserved matters ahead of the General Election.



Agnes Tolmie, SWC Chair

Agnes is Chair of the SWC and has been an active campaigner in the women's movement for over thirty years. These campaigns include equal pay and women's representation in political and public life. During the 1990's Agnes was involved with a coalition of women in Scotland for the establishment of a Scottish Parliament. She campaigned with the STUC Women's Committee for the 50/50 gender balance within the new Scottish Parliament. She was an active anti-apartheid campaigner and visited South Africa with the first all women delegation, which was a joint ACTSA/STUC delegation.

Agnes is a member of the STUC Women's Committee and has been Chair on three occasions. Agnes is past President of the STUC. She was the recipient of the STUC Women's Meritorious Award in 2012 and TUC Gold Badge for Service to Women in 2013. Agnes is a National Executive member of Unite the Union and member of the Unite Women's Committee, a member of the UNI Global Union World Executive Board and their World Women's Committee. Agnes is a past Commissioner of the Women's National Commission and current member of the Older Women's Commission.

"Women make up 52% of Scotland's population but their voices are diluted in political debate. It always seems to be men who shout loudest. It is presumed that women don't have views on employment, welfare reform, defence or the constitution, and instead they are only interested in 'caring' issues. The SWC has found this is far from true.

At the SWC referendum conferences last year, topics ranged from taxation and employment practices to economic strategies and our place in Europe. Women want to know more, want the information to make an informed decision for themselves, their families, their communities.

A recent study by the 'Everyday Sexism' project states that women are less politically engaged than men. That politics, in the media, is conducted in a very male space. The research focussed on social media, where views, opinions and comments are often made anonymously.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that men are not happy when women talk about things that are seen as the domain of men – including politics.

It is great to see Scotland leading the way with its first woman First Minister. However, rather than talk about her politics, the media focus on her hairstyle and what she is wearing. This damages the view of women as politicians, creating negative images and knocking the confidence of those women who want to enter the political arena.

Women are the backbone of everyone's daily lives in Scotland. We are mothers, partners, friends, workers. Our input into Scotland's economy is often undervalued. Many women are in low paid, low skilled, part-time work, more often than not because it fits in with everything else around them – family, caring, community. Women today want more. They want to be valued, have their opinions and concerns acknowledged and action taken to support them in their daily lives.”



Annabel Goldie MSP, Scottish Conservative Party

Annabel Goldie MSP was born in 1950 and is a regional MSP for the West of Scotland Region. She was created a House of Lords life peer on 3 October 2013 and formally introduced on 11 November 2013. She was Leader of the Conservative MSP Group from November 2005 to November 2011. She is currently the Conservative spokesperson for Constitution. She is a member of the Welfare Reform Committee and the Cross Party Groups on Learning Disability and Architecture and The Built Environment.

Annabel was educated at Kilmacolm Primary School, Greenock Academy, studied Law at Strathclyde University and graduated LL.B. From 1978 – January 2006 she was a partner in the Glasgow firm of Donaldson, Alexander, Russell & Haddow. Annabel is also a Deputy Lieutenant of the County of Renfrewshire, Member of the Salvation Army West of Scotland Advisory Board, an Elder of the Church of Scotland in Bishopton, Honorary Fellow of the University of Strathclyde and Honorary Fellow of the RIAS.

When time permits she likes taking in a film, concert or play, bird watching or engaging in an unsuccessful battle with the garden!

“There are some issues that transcend us all in this election. If we do not get the economy right, we do not get our public services right and we do not get the broad-based and well funded and supported society that we want. If the economy is not working, then nothing else is working. Five years ago the situation was very serious. There was no money left from the previous government and we were in an appalling deficit. Taxpayers money was being spent servicing that debt rather than going into public services. In the last five years the deficit has been halved and the Government has maintained low interest rates and low inflation. Low interest rates have been helpful, particularly for those paying loans they have incurred or mortgage payments.

Again, encouragingly, employment has gone up and unemployment has gone down. In Scotland we have 174,000 more people in employment than we did 5 years ago and about 56,000 fewer claiming Jobseekers Allowance (JSA). That’s the direction we want to keep travelling in. When you are working, what really matters is what you have at the end of the week or the end of the month. I am encouraged to see steps taken to cut taxes for people who are earning, which happened by increasing the personal allowance. My party wants to build on this hard-fought, painful recovery, which is still very fragile.

It has been my very clear impression that the most important thing for many women is getting back into the workplace. Many want to do so, but find it difficult. Childcare is at the heart of what we can do to help. Praise where praise is due, the SNP Government has improved the position of childcare in Scotland, however childcare is fairly inflexible. I want it to be provided on the basis of what suits the mum in terms of time and hours and terms of where she can put her child. My party wants to create that, working on a voucher system so women can say what they want or need and use their voucher to buy that service. That’s not a flexibility we have at the moment.

Many women have left education because they have concentrated on raising a family and can find it difficult to refresh the learning they have. We’ve got quite a challenge with education in Scotland which goes back to question of choice. I believe we all get on best if we are given the power to make decisions that suit us and our families. At the moment we don’t have that. If you’re very wealthy, you can send your child to a fee paying school, or you buy a house in a prosperous area because there will be a good school there. Why can’t we have comparable quality in the state sector?

We would like to see parents being given the opportunity, if they are so minded, to have the chance to run a school. An example is St Joseph’s primary in Milngavie, which the Local Authority is proposing to close as it is very difficult to fund. A group of parents have said they are prepared to take it on and run it, but that doesn’t fit the system at the moment. Why do we put this type of obstruction in front of parents?

We have also seen a dramatic cut in college places in Scotland. For many women, access to local college is vital in terms of re-skilling or refreshing skills they already have. Part-time courses, which fit in with other responsibilities, have been slashed. We want to see restored college provision, with greater flexibility.

We need to consider what we want for Scotland as a whole. During the referendum campaign there were good things. It energised interest and invigorated young people, which completely changed my party's view of giving votes to 16 and 17 year olds. However there was another side to the referendum, where many families, communities and workplaces were split. Maybe that was inevitable, but I do not want to go back there any time soon. I want that referendum result to be respected and I want Scotland to move forward not worrying about or being distracted by further constitutional change.

I want us to concentrate on how we do better with childcare, provide more access to college places for women and provide real opportunities in the labour market for women. We have to keep the momentum up if we're going to do that. The Conservatives can be trusted with the economy and with fighting for Scotland to stay in the UK. I'm concerned that if the SNP are returned to Westminster in significant numbers, they will use that not to shake up Westminster but to break up Britain. I don't want to go back to that territory. I want us to settle down and concentrate on going forward with a sense of vision and not a constant constitutional distraction."

Kim Long, Scottish Green Party Candidate, Glasgow East

Kim Long grew up in Glasgow and lives in the east end. Kim is self-employed as a community worker and facilitator, working with women and young people on behalf of a number of key third-sector organisations including WEvolution and Glasgow Women's Library. In addition, Kim helped build a new social enterprise developing creative work within criminal justice. Through this, Kim leads ground-breaking singing and song writing projects in prisons across Scotland.

"The Scottish Green Party is a party of equality, which puts people before profit and is a party of participative democracy. Those are my key values in this election campaign.

Austerity is hitting the public sector, where twice as many women work as men. Women are living with pay freezes and redundancies which leave gaps in the workplace that are not filled. Women's working lives are becoming increasingly pressured and with more austerity it's only going to get worse. Women are more likely to be in precarious low paid work and are less likely to have built up savings, which puts them and their families at more risk of poverty.

Since 2010, 85% of public spending cuts to benefits, taxation, pay and benefits have been taken from women's incomes. The way we do economics has failed and responses to this have also failed. Austerity is not progress. Its not working and it's hitting women and the most vulnerable hardest.

The Scottish Green Party will make a clean break from austerity to create a more equal society and a job rich economy. It is not enough to hear about more jobs created. We want to know if they are good jobs, and if they pay for families.

The Living Wage should be a basic right. It is outrageous that 43% of working age adults in severe poverty are in households where at least one adult is in work. We will increase the National Minimum Wage to the Living Wage, but we will do so in steps and support small businesses to get there, with a target of £10/hour for everyone by 2020. We will also ban zero hours contracts, which are unfair and exploitative. We will ensure women are paid the same as men by requiring businesses to publish pay data. We will also require public and company boards to comprise at least 40% women.

The Greens are all about giving power to communities and workplace democracy. We believe in trade unions and will roll back anti-trade union laws. We will also make access to Employment Tribunals free. In circumstances where workers are being treated poorly, will give them the opportunity to buy out workplaces and turn them into workers cooperatives.

Raising children, caring for relatives, housework and contributing to communities by volunteering is all predominantly done by women. At least 59% of unpaid carers in Scotland are women and the majority of childcare is carried out by women. Meanwhile the time men spend doing housework has only increased at a rate of 1minute per day per year since the 1970s.

We believe that Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is wholly inadequate as a measure as to how society is doing. It does not recognise wellbeing and health, does not measure the gap between rich and poor and, fundamentally for women, it doesn't recognise the value of unpaid work. This is just one of the aspect of inequality that pervades society.

The Greens will introduce a wealth tax of 2% on the wealthiest 1% and clamp down on tax evasion and avoidance. We will introduce laws to limit CEO pay and tie it in with the lowest paid workers, usually cleaners, usually women, so when the CEO gets a raise, so does the cleaner. We will roll back welfare cuts, abolish the bedroom tax and lift the sanction regime. We will halt the roll out of Universal Credit (UC) and allow the Scottish Parliament to design a scheme that works with the new devolved social security powers. We will build a welfare system that removes stigma and promotes equality, working towards a citizens income which would benefit women who undertake unpaid work.

We are committed to a publicly funded NHS, free at point of use. We will repeal the 2012 Health and Social Care Act which is privatising the NHS in England and Wales. It is bad for people across the UK and risks reducing money available for Scotland in the future. The Greens are ready for change and we are in a strong position to deliver a real alternative to the Westminster parties.”

Siobhan McMahon MSP, Scottish Labour Party

Siobhan McMahon was elected as a Labour Party MSP for Central Scotland in May 2011. Previous to this, she worked as a Labour Party researcher in the Scottish Parliament and she also worked for Jim Murphy. Siobhan also worked as part of the Labour Support Unit in the Scottish Parliament.

Siobhan graduated from Glasgow Caledonian University with a 2.1 BA Honours in Politics with History and Sociology in 2006. She is currently Shadow Minister for Women's and Youth Employment, as well as a member of the Education & Culture Committee. Siobhan is a member of various Cross party Groups, and is Deputy Convenor of the Cross-Party Groups on Disability and Malawi. Siobhan is a long standing member of Labour and the GMB.

"My heart sinks when women tell me they 'don't do politics'. Despite the groundbreaking political activism in the referendum, there's still a high level of disillusionment about politics overall. Across the UK over 9 million women did not vote in the last General Election and that needs to be considered.

I am proud of the efforts Labour have made to engage women in this General Election campaign, be it where they work, where they shop, at the school gates or anywhere else. We haven't waited for women to come to us, but have gone out and sought their views on a number of issues. I am happy to stand behind the record of the last Labour Governments both in the UK and in Scotland, which delivered progressive change for women.

It was the Labour Government who established in law the principle of a fair day's pay for a fair day's work. We increased maternity leave to 9 months and doubled maternity pay, as well as introducing paternity leave. We challenged the patriarchal perception that women alone are responsible for caring for a child. It was the last Labour Government in Scotland which piloted specialist domestic abuse courts.

Some of the greatest achievements of the last Labour Government predominantly benefitted women. The minimum wage is another example, as well as the introduction of child and working tax credits to support families, alleviate child poverty and make work pay for women on low incomes. There is a pronounced difference between the last Labour Government in Westminster and the UK Coalition Government. The last budget showed they do not understand that gender is even an issue - of the proposed austerity budget cuts, 80% fall on women. I can't imagine cuts which would have such an impact on any other protected group would be tolerated. These cuts will diminish financial independence and leave women dependent on men.

Scottish Labour have identified that the main problems for women in Scotland are in regards to work. There are over 100,000 Scots on precarious zero hours contracts. A disproportionately large number of them are women. Scottish Labour are committed to abolishing these exploitative contracts. Women make up 78% of part-time workers in Scotland and with part-time wages falling in the last year, Labour's promise to increase the minimum wage has never been more important.

I have worked in my capacity as Shadow Minister for Youth and Women's Employment on the underrepresentation of women in Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM). Only 68 of the 24,000 apprentices in engineering during the last year were women. All things suggest that jobs for the future will come from industries that women traditionally do not enter. If we're not careful we will lock women out of these career paths and keep them consigned to traditionally female roles which are low paid and low skilled. That's why Scottish Labour are committed to investment in these sectors. We are keen to promote STEM subjects to help women succeed.

Labour's proposals to freeze energy bills until 2017 will help a number of families, and the introduction of a mansion tax will fund 1000 extra nurses for the NHS in Scotland. We have earmarked £2.3m of the money that will come from the 50p top rate of tax for Scottish Women's Aid. We will also raise £175 million to be spent in Scotland on abolishing the bedroom tax and creating an anti-poverty fund to eliminate foodbanks. We will eradicate Employment Tribunal fees, the introduction of which has led to a reduction of 60% in general discrimination cases. We will force companies with more than 250 people to publish gender pay statistics, legislate for quotas on public boards and tackle maternity discrimination. We will also continue to focus on health issues unique to women."

Elsbeth Attwooll, Scottish Liberal Democrats

Elsbeth Attwooll is the President of Scottish Liberal Democrat Women. She was one of Scotland's MEPs from 1999 to 2009. Before that she taught for more than thirty years in the Law School at Glasgow University. During that period most of her spare time was taken up with political activities, largely in the Maryhill area, where she still stays.

"Given the serious financial mess we were in, entering the coalition in 2010 was the right thing to do. I do have to admit, inexperienced in government and the junior partner in the coalition, we made some mistakes. Tuition fees is the obvious one, and letting the bedroom tax slip through is something we should not have allowed.

There however are a number of things particularly affecting women and families that I believe would never have happened without the Liberal Democrats pushing them forward. We would not have had the cut in taxes for lower and middle income people without us. For the future we would like to see that go up so nobody on the current National Minimum Wage would be paying tax. We also contributed significantly to the increase in the state pension with the 'triple lock'. We were highly involved in improving the right to flexible working and the introduction of much more by way of shared parental leave. There has been a small fall in the gender pay gap, and there will shortly be a requirement for those employing over 250 people to publish details of the pay gap. We will never solve the gender pay gap until we realise that the kind of work in which women predominate is still undervalued by society. We have to tackle that root and branch.

I pay tribute to Jo Swinson as Equalities Minister for the work she has done around flexible working and shared parental leave, and Lynne Featherstone for campaigning against unrealistic portrayals of women in the media. Until we get rid of that, a lot of young women are at risk of serious health issues. I also think we should be proud of the £35 million that went to the Department for International Development (DfID) to counter FGM worldwide. I am very proud too of Michael Moore's bill to enshrine in law that 0.7% of GDP will go to overseas aid.

There are a lot of things for the future that we need to do. We need to carry on improving the position of women. The reintroduction of targets to end child poverty would also be a priority. We need to improve the present position of free childcare and we need to give more help to carers, including the right to a respite package. Much more also needs to be done to improve on the minimum wage.

There is an idea in our pre-manifesto that we should mainstream gender – that is to say in every policy decision we take we should look at the implications for both genders. Unless we do this, we're not going to improve the position of women.”

Councillor Susan Aitken, Scottish National Party

Susan Aitken is Leader of the Opposition on Glasgow City Council. Before her election as a councillor for the Langside ward in Glasgow in 2012, she worked in a variety of policy roles in third sector organisations and in the Scottish Parliament and as a freelance writer and editor, with a particular focus on health and social care issues.

She served as the Glasgow SNP group's social work spokesperson before being elected SNP group leader in 2014. Susan holds the role of Local Government Convener on the SNP's National Executive Committee and is currently a member of the Commission on Local Tax Reform.

“2012 was a period when women’s employment was falling and men’s was rising. That was a really serious concern for women’s position in the labour market in Scotland, as there’s a significant economic as well as social problem when that happens. Countries that don’t provide employment opportunities for women are limiting their own abilities to grow. Creating opportunities for women is the key to prosperity and fairness. As a result the Scottish Government held a Women’s Employment Summit and established a Strategic Ministerial Group on women and work. When Roseanna Cunningham was appointed Cabinet Secretary for Fair Work Skills and Training she was given specific remit for Women. Those concerted efforts have made a difference and we now have the second highest female employment rate in the EU.

Although the gap between men’s and women’s employment in Scotland is down to 4% that includes a lot of part time workers and in full time employment it’s still 15%. Underemployment is higher among women and the pay gap is 9%. It was disappointing that the Smith Commission didn’t recommend the devolution of either equalities or employment legislation or the minimum wage, which would have given us far stronger tools to make progress for women in the workplace.

The SNP does not view childcare as simply a women’s issue or a nice cosy bribe for women voters. We believe that it is an essential part of our national economic infrastructure – if there are more women in secure, decently paid employment, then more Scottish households will be lifted out of and protected from poverty. Child poverty in Scotland is rising as a result of welfare reform. Women also suffer most from the appalling benefits sanction regime.

Without some strong progressive voices arguing for change at Westminster things are only going to get worse. A change of course at Westminster is needed to put people back at the heart of economic policy. SNP MPs will campaign for UK budgets and welfare cuts to be subject to equality impact assessments similar to the vigorous standards we have here in the Scottish Parliament. An increase in public spending is a better way to reduce the deficit over time, improve growth and get the economy back on track without the dreadful human cost that austerity will bring. SNP MPs will campaign for this at Westminster. We will also campaign for a ban on zero hours contracts and oppose the renewal of Trident.

The First Minister has made women’s participation in public life, and politics in particular, a clear priority. It has always been a clear priority for me since the STUC Women’s Committee 50/50 campaign prior to devolution. If you want equality, don’t ever give up without a fight. I’m not going to pretend my party doesn’t have some serious work to do in this area but for the first time we have women only shortlists for next year’s election. These will allow us to address serious gender imbalances in our Parliamentary group. We are hoping to extend that to the Council elections in 2017. At present there are as many men called Ian who lead SNP Council groups as there are women so there’s a lot of work to do there.

SNP MPs will push to tackle inequality at a UK level. We have a very strong message in this campaign is that there is no social justice without gender justice.”

Sandra Webster, Scottish Socialist Party Candidate

Sandra Webster is a mother of three children, two of whom have additional support needs. Due to this and her own long term health conditions she has an interest in carers and people with disabilities rights. She is a writer especially around welfare reform, the impact of the cuts and equality. In her spare time she enjoys creative writing. She is co-spokesperson of the Scottish Socialist Party and is standing as a candidate for the first time in the Paisley and Renfrewshire South General Election.

“We really need safe places for women, and I include that in my own party as well. We’ve seen a huge amount of growth with young women coming forward but representation is not as good as it should be so we’re working on that. We’re a 50/50 party who know that the present system just isn’t working.

45% of adults living in poverty live in a household where one person is working yet they still have to rely on foodbanks. The cuts affect mostly women, we’re the ones in the firing line. As a carer I can see what’s happening. The SSP is not a poverty tourist party. A lot of us live in poverty on a limited income. Many have relied on the Scottish Welfare Fund, which used to be a payment made given directly to people. This Government have decided that unemployed people, those on limited incomes are feckless. Now you are given things which are cheap and liable to break rather than being able to spend the money on things that families actually need.

Women work in low paid jobs and undertake the majority of unpaid caring. There are proposals in the pipeline whereby if you have more than one disabled child you will only be able to claim for one. The UK Government are also talking about limiting child benefit. It is the only benefit paid directly to women and means they can feed their families. We are also being told that this may be limited to two children.

Unpaid carers contribute £10bn to the Scottish economy alone and as such they should receive the same wages as an average worker. We know that most carers work more than 60 hours a week and the SSP want to see them paid a minimum wage of £10 per hour. This should be the minimum wage and should be paid now. We believe this can be done by taking money from big businesses and from those who can afford to pay. I am not ashamed to say I believe in the redistribution of wealth.

For the SSP, it’s not about having power, it’s about having equality. That’s the kind of society we need to aspire to. Austerity is affecting women and children most and we need a different way.”

Question and Answer Session/Contributions from the Floor

We are always hearing of the difficulties regarding benefit “entitlements”, especially where it relates to suspension due to non compliance of a required action by the claimant. What is the Liberal Democrats stance on this?

Elspeth Atwool (EA)

There are two ways in which we need to tackle the problem. I am very conscious in relation to those with disabilities, particularly hidden disabilities, that we must have a better way of assessing whether people are fit for work. There is a real harshness to the black and white nature of the rules. There is also the problem of people having sanctions applied to them in circumstances where they were unable to do anything about it, for example if they were ill and couldn't go to the Jobcentre. The current suggestion is the introduction of a 'yellow card' to warn people that unless they take some kind of action they're liable to lose their benefits. We hope that would help. Overall, there needs to be a much more human and humane approach to everybody who is seeking benefits and we must do our best to treat people as individuals and not just as a unit that has to be dealt with one way or another. There are times when people miss appointments for what are good reasons. There should be an understanding that this happens and there should be a warning to say if you do this again there will be consequences.

At the moment, women's sanitary products, such as tampons and sanitary towels, are subject to VAT as they are deemed 'luxury items'. What plans does your party have to repeal this unfair levy on a necessary product?

Sandra Webster (SW)

This has been SSP party policy for over ten years. We would go further and try and make them free, but VAT would be a good place to start.

Susan Aitken (SA)

This is an incredibly important point and is grossly unfair. In the bigger picture discussions about big issues on taxation and the economy, it can slip through the net and does not necessarily end up in manifestos where it needs to be.

EA

One of the problems is when something is classified as falling into a certain category for VAT there are difficulties in changing it, and this is something that would have to be worked through Europe. If there are examples in other countries of this being done it will be easier to try and re-classify products here. It is certainly something I will be pushing with my own colleagues.

Siobhan McMahon (SM)

I have had questions about this from constituents before. Why should women be penalised when other products receive a tax break? It really does go back to EU law so should have been a bigger issue for the European elections – that's not to say that Westminster can't do anything about it but we should be lobbying our MEPs.

AG

I don't know if my party has any proposals on this topic, however I am not un-sympathetic at all. It is very interesting that razors are VAT exempt when a man doesn't have to shave, however women don't have much choice each month.

Kim Long (KL)

I get this a lot from younger women and it's something I'm really passionate about. My party believes women should not have to pay VAT on these items, however the issue for me is not as urgent as the provision of sanitary products for really vulnerable women i.e. those in prison, who are homeless or for asylum seeking women. There's no dignity in that. Getting to free products is the goal because it's not a luxury.

What can Government do to put morality back at the heart of global and national economic policy making?

AG

There is a debate about how you have an economy. Many want to get away from an entrepreneurial-based profit making model, which is fine as a philosophical idea but that poses the question of what do you put in its place? What we have is the only proven model that works, and that is a free enterprise economy. Questions then arise about how you manage the success of that type of economy. In terms of the global scene, there is, to me, a very visible divide. We may think here in the UK and in Scotland that we have challenges, but when you look at some of the desperate poverty such as in the third world it's very troubling. What the more successful world powers can do is see what kind of contribution they can make to these countries. I am very proud of our stance and I think it's important to set that example.

Questioner

The Government signed up to the UN Millennium Development Goals many years ago, however very few of them have been achieved. In the Autumn a new series of goals will replace them. This is an opportunity to include goals for reducing inequality which would apply to both developing and developed countries. With regards to national economic policy making, I asked my family about this and there were three suggestions. Rewrite company law and don't give as much prominence to profit; reform the tax system to ensure it rewards businesses for their contribution to the UK economy; and finally wider society should have the ability to regulate and intervene in markets which are unjust. The voice of those without wealth should be a key part of that process.

AG

One of the difficulties is always how you keep the operation of a functioning economy, which is creating jobs. This can only happen when businesses are able to function. We have to also watch the hand of regulation. We have seen in the past well intentioned efforts by the Government to intervene in economic activity and it's been disastrous and counter-productive. Ultimately we have to be careful about the way we make changes - a balance has to be struck.

For years the African and Caribbean Women's Alliance (ACWA) have been campaigning for awareness of sickle cell – a rare genetic disorder. Patients have advised us that paramedics don't have protocol when called for assistance, and some don't know what the disorder is. Patients are having to explain to them what they need in terms of medication on their way to hospital. There is no specialist provision in Scotland. What will the Government do to help?

SA

This is a very important point. Conditions come to NHS all the time where there's not the expertise or knowledge because it's something they've not dealt with before. I know that sickle cell affects those from African Caribbean backgrounds and the population has grown significantly. With that, sickle cell is an issue for the NHS in Scotland and we have to get up to date with that. The first point of contact can be an issue for rarer diseases and there is a need for our public services to respond to demographic changes and to changes within our population. This is a question of equality as well. Our public services have to be able to respond to that.

Nicola Sturgeon said recently that one of the actions SNP MPs at Westminster would take forward would be to try to abolish the House of Lords. I would like to know the views of the other parties with regards to abolishing the House of Lords.

SW

We oppose an unelected second Chamber. There should be a second Chamber but it should be elected, it should be people who represent us not just those in society who are given titles.

SA

SNP policy on this is longstanding. We have never nominated to nor taken a place in the House of Lords.

EA

If you are committed, as my party is, to a Federal UK, there should be various Parliaments and one central Parliament which has to be democratically elected. The only positive with the current system is that a lot of ill-advised things which have been introduced into the Commons have been made a lot better by passage through the House of Lords. I wouldn't like to see that go. However having people appointed rather than directly elected is wrong and it's about time we phase that out.

SM

The Labour Party would also abolish the House of Lords. My concern is with people who are appointed on how much money they give to political parties – they get their title as a sense of privilege and that is not representative of wider society.

KL

I would echo comments about the need for a Second Chamber. Green policy is to abolish the House of Lords as it stands and create a democratically elected second Chamber. We also believe in votes at 16, more proportional representation and we believe that those who are elected look like the society who elects them.

AG

The House of Lords does exist to scrutinise legislation from the House of Commons and it does that very effectively. The presence of Cross Benchers – people with no party political hat who have been selected because of their expertise in their own field – is important in the Lords. Contributions from them in debates is stimulating. I don't want to abolish the Lords as I think it is performing a necessary function. There may, however, be a question about whether it can be made better, whether it can be reformed. The need for a body that scrutinises legislation is extremely important.

If we have another elected Chamber, would that mean one is setting up in competition with the other? Any supervising mechanism needs people on it who are able through experience and skill to make a meaningful job of looking at legislation. Members should have the independence of mind, without any particularly political allegiance. Many of the former MPs who have joined the Lords don't hold particular allegiance to their parties which is very refreshing. They are experienced enough to say when they don't think things are going to work. I think the House of Lords does a good job and I don't think abolishing it and just getting an elected alternative would necessarily serve you any better or give you what you need.

From the Floor

It's an absurdity in this day and age that anyone gets the right to become a Lord simply because an ancestor did something in one regard or another. We are also only one of the few countries in the world where people are in the House of Lords simply because they represent the State church. This is a secular body and should be that. The Lords could be elected on regional bodies bringing forward regional interest rather than being elected like an MP. Some people may have an interest or expertise in a particular topic and they may be valuable on that topic but that can make them almost oblivious to everything else.

What is your view on giving the right to work to asylum seekers? We are killing people slowly. If you take away their right to work, to contribute, they don't have value from their own family, children, society and community.

KL

Women in the asylum process have very specific needs which are not being met by the system at present. For women who have been victims of sexual abuse, torture and rape, the UK Border Agency don't understand the situation these women are coming from. The women themselves don't know they have to explain it because it's so obvious, so there's a disconnect there. When they realise they have to explain more about the patriarchal norms of their culture they get branded as liars, so there are some fundamental problems there. It's a shame on our society for any woman to be detained following any kind of abuse. We should not accept it. Our party is committed to working against that and we believe that asylum seekers should work. We know that as soon as they get refugee status people are working in areas like the NHS, they're qualified doctors and nurses. It takes much less money to train someone in the NHS who is already qualified than it does to train a new doctor from scratch. It works economically and it works on a human basis.

SW

Personally I am the granddaughter of economic immigrants from Ireland and we're a stronger nation because of immigration. We should welcome all of the new people who are coming here. We've got plenty of room and plenty of opportunities. The lack of media coverage of places like Dungavel and what's happening there is shocking.

How are you going to work to ensure that women who are seeking asylum are respected and treated with dignity?

SA

I think that the treatment of asylum seekers in the UK is a badge of shame for successive Westminster Governments. As a result of a motion I put up, Glasgow became the first Council in the UK to explicitly condemn the destitution of asylum seekers as a UK Government policy. One of the first acts of the SNP in Government was to publish a statement of intent on the treatment of asylum seekers. We believe they should be allowed to work for a living and earn and keep themselves and their families as soon as they are in a position to be able to work. The current system is counter-productive and actually feeds the demonization of asylum seekers. They are forced, through no choice or fault of their own, to claim extremely meagre benefits. Why on earth would we not harness and use the skills that are being brought to this country by those who have fled persecution and fear of death in their own countries? The treatment of women and children is particularly shameful. Detention of children stopped in Scotland because of a strong, vocal campaign. However now women and children are taken from Scotland and detained in England instead. That's not what we wanted. We didn't just not want the detention of in Scotland. We wanted it to end full stop. It is SNP policy to reform the asylum system and make it about compassion, humanity, welfare and support, not about treating people like criminals.

EA

I am proud of the fact it was Liberal Democrat pressure that led to the end of child detention at Dungavel.

But it's just not worked out the way it should have. Who wants to live in a world that treats people this way? Asylum seekers can be called down to England with very short notice and not necessarily with the right support to make their case. This is not right. We have got to stop the Home Office thinking that these people are statistics. They are people who have very often suffered terribly in their lives before coming here. Why do we allow the words asylum seekers and illegal immigrants to be seen as the same thing? We need to fight back against the media which demonises immigrants.

Carers get paid £61 per week as long as they are caring for someone over 35 hours per week. Children with additional needs are being made to fit into our society when really we should be doing what we can to fit into theirs. What can your party do about this?

SW

I have two sons with autism. One was been failed by the system, and I had to fight for 14 years to get him into a special needs school. The other one was lucky as he was put into a unit from nursery school onwards which dealt with his needs. There's a propensity to mainstream and that's fine in theory. It is, however, being used to make cuts. All children with special needs are being placed in mainstream school this year for the first 8 weeks. They will be assessed for additional support needs from there. How is this good for teachers and for the other kids? There should be support but there isn't. Classroom assistants are being cut back. People are demonising day centres saying they're ghettos but people use and appreciate them to socialise etc. In my party we're about giving carers a voice, ensuring that they will be listened to as part of our party and our processes.

SA

There's a Carers Bill coming to the Scottish Parliament this year and Carers Allowance is one of the powers being devolved to Holyrood. One of the key provisions in the Bill is around strengthening carers rights. The needs of the carer and person they care for are so intricately linked they can't be separated in policy decisions. We need to get back to a more holistic approach to how carers and families and support networks are affected as well. There is no separateness about carers and those they care for – it's quite the opposite. It's important people keep an eye on what's happening with the Carers Bill and get their voices heard.

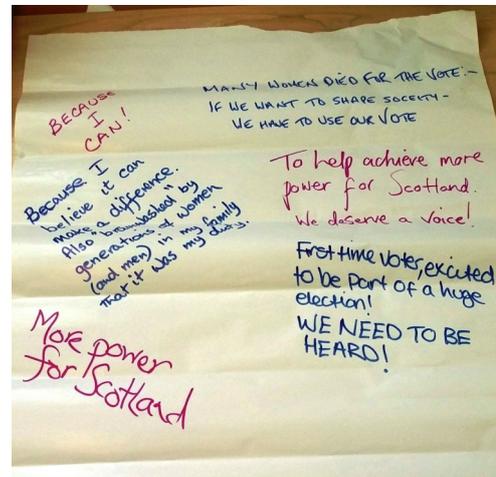
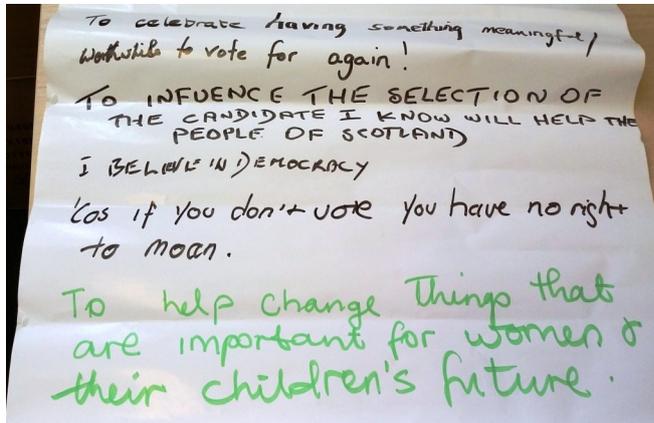
SM

We are currently working with carers and trying to get care recognised as one of the pillars of the economy. Society washes aside the importance of the work of unpaid carers and we doesn't give it enough attention.

AG

Another strand to the question that was asked is that it is important to recognise that one size does not fit all. Equally I don't think the Local Authority should always be the provider for every service.

I think people should be given more choice. The third sector and charities should be given the right to bid to the Local Authority to provide more services. It's an area where greater choice could be offered to both carer and family, where a less uniform more tailored approach to whatever may suit the individual involved could be offered.



Closing Remarks

Sandra Webster

Most of us on the panel agree that austerity isn't working. As a society we paid £200bn to bail the banks out – that's money which could have been paid to make a fairer society. That's why I'm in the Scottish Socialist Party and I'm proud to be standing as a candidate.

Susan Aitken

This event has been a clear indication of how to have a political debate in an entirely civilised, friendly and sisterly way. It has been incredibly valuable. It is interesting that the questions were starting to stray into policy areas which can not necessarily to be dealt with at this election. To me, that illustrates where we are in Scotland today. It is very difficult to pick all these things apart because everything comes down to how we manage our economy and how we prioritise spending. Decisions made at Westminster have a direct impact at Holyrood on their ability to make spending choices and then consequently at Local Authority level. What kind of voices do we need at Westminster? Can it be the same as it's been before or do we want to shake it up and have progressive voices that will speak up for people in Scotland?

Elsbeth Atwool

Many people believe that women have a different way of dealing with things than men – we are more interconnected and much more about caring. That has come across in the questions and answers today. My experience in the European Parliament was great – there, people across the political divide tried to work together to come up with a common solution. As a woman that was a helpful, useful way of learning, because we helped and supported each other. Sometimes when I see Westminster and particularly Prime Minister's Question Time, I wonder if this is the way we should be gathered. We need to introduce a new way of doing things, where we work together and treat people as individuals. We need to bring together a new form of politics with morality underneath it. The Liberal Democrat slogan is 'stronger economy, fairer society', but that could be turned round to say fairer economy, stronger society and still have the same impact. We have to bring all these threads together.

Siobhan McMahon

All of us on the panel have notes about what might have come up, but it doesn't matter how much research we all do, questions will always be asked that we know nothing about. That's good, because it gives us the chance to think about what we need to look at, what we need to do within our parties and look at the issues that matter to people. We've all been through austerity, but those who have found it harder are the most vulnerable, particularly disabled people. What is the alternative to the Conservatives? I want to see us move on from where we are just now and be a lot more progressive.

Annabel Goldie

There is a choice at this election – either David Cameron or Ed Miliband will be Prime Minister. The key to all this is trying to continue with rebuilding the economy and all of the questions which have been asked today require a functioning effective economy. I'm worried about Labour's proposals for spend. I'm also worried about the SNP, especially hearing Nicola Sturgeon say if she could vote for full fiscal autonomy for Scotland she would. That would confront us in terms of the taxes we would raise and the expenditure we've got, with an appalling black hole, independently assessed at £7.6bn. It matters that the economy continues to function and grow. I am delighted that women's employment has reached record levels – that is not an accident. Good things are happening and that is why I think the proof of the pudding is in the eating. It is vital that the recovering economy continues to grow and it needs a steady hand to do so. I think the coalition has provided this steady hand. As a proud Scot and a proud UK citizen, I don't want to return to the instability of another referendum. I believe the Conservatives are the best prospect for the economy and can be trusted with Scotland in the UK

Kim Long

With regards to sanctioning, it is frightening that if someone is 5 minutes late the appropriate response is punishment. I would just ask for some empathy there, as all of us have been five minutes late for something. Most of those living in poverty don't have a car so are reliant on public transport and we know that's not reliable.

You can be late for an appointment for any number of reasons, it is not a proportionate response to then say the claimant and their family are not going to eat for a week as a result.

The Greens are good at promoting women - 40% of our candidates are women. However we still have so much to do in other areas, for example we have no BME candidates which is shocking. These are the things we need to look at – not only getting women involved, but getting all women involved. There's a huge time commitment if they have caring responsibilities or kids to look after. As long as we have a system where it's about evening meetings then that will be a huge barrier to women. I am encouraged by the growth of non-party movements which are looking at things more creatively and ensuring that diverse voices are heard. In terms of the Green party, we have alternatives to austerity and to privatisation. We want to put public services in public hands, and we have alternatives to centralisation because we're about putting the power into communities. It's time for something different, it's time for a change. Vote for what you believe in. Vote Scottish Greens.

Susan Morrison, comedian, provided a resume of the proceedings and encouraged women to use their vote on 7th May.



Feedback from those attending:

"Really enjoyed my first Hustings event. Also brought my 20 year old daughter with me."

"A fabulous event which has left me with food for thought."

"A great example of how to behave and respect each other's views."

The SWC would like to thank the speakers and political parties for their support in ensuring the success of this event.

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