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Ian Blackford: The Lochaber Times interview

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Ian Blackford was elected as the SNP Member of Parliament (MP) for Ross, Skye and Lochaber in 2015. He served as the SNP leader at Westminster from 2017 to 2022, and won re-election in 2017 and 2019. On May 30, with parliament's dissolution for the upcoming general election, his time as an MP concluded. Last week our reporter Jamie Wills spoke in person to the former MP. What follows is the full interview:

Former MP for Ross, Skye and Lochaber Ian Blackford is standing back from Westminster duties.

Although it was last summer you said you were not going to stand again, how do you feel about your time as an MP coming to an end now that it is here?

A range of emotions. To be honest, it has been an absolute privilege to serve everybody in Ross, Skye and Lochaber over the course of the last nine years.

I was elected as an SNP Member of Parliament, but your job when you are elected is to represent everybody, and I suppose the thing which has given me most satisfaction over the piece is the the amount of casework that not just me, but that me and my team have engaged in. A lot of the thanks for everything we have achieved goes down to them. If you think about the constituency, there are 54,000 electors and, of course, people come, people go, but over the nine years we have actually corresponded with more than 38,000 electors, which is quite remarkable. There is also something a bit special about being a Highland and Island MP. The fact these are, in the main, relatively small

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rural communities, it is almost as if people have a sense of ownership over you and I have been very grateful for the privilege that I have been given.

Are you going to miss it?

Yes, I will. It might sound slightly strange as an SNP Member of Parliament, and someone that absolutely, dearly wants Scotland to be an independent country, but I never, I hope, disrespected the place or the responsibility of representing people. I tried to use parliament and that engagement with ministers to get things done. So, yes, I will miss that aspect of it, and obviously miss my colleagues and my staff. One of the things I would say is that when any individual stands down as a Member of Parliament, or indeed loses his seat, often the attention is on the Member of Parliament, but actually the people that are really affected are those that work for you, and most of them have been with me for pretty well the entire journey. I am really grateful for everything they have done to support constituents and support me in the job we have all been doing.

Have your constituency staff members already decided what they are going to do next?

There is a period of closing everything down that will take some time, so even though I am not a Member of Parliament there is still casework we are running to an ordinary conclusion. I suspect I will be looking to see what they do beyond that and if I can assist them and support them in any way, then obviously I would do that. But they have to find other employment.

As you look back at your nine years as an MP, are there any policies or campaigns of which you are particularly proud?

I mentioned the case work, the 38,000 plus people that have been in touch with us, and while I always regretted it when you were not able to help people, there were many occasions where, as a last resort and using the office of MP as people are entitled to do, we were able to get results for them. There was a terribly sad case, of course, of Lindsay Jarrett in Lochaber. Many people sought to help Lindsay, and we played a small part in that, particularly in facilitating a transfer down to London for her to get new lungs. Sad to say, we lost Lindsay a year ago, but situations like that where you can help people, there is a sense of satisfaction. There are also a number of people in the constituency that we saved from deportation: one of the things that surprised me is the amount of time that I have spent on immigration matters. The convergence uplift money - they have got additional support for crofters and farmers right across Scotland, but particularly the Highlands - and bearing down on tax avoidance - tax evasion if you like - is something I have also been quite heavily involved in. So lots of things where I can look back and say ‘Yeah, we are trying to be a force for good’, where we have been able to positively influence legislation.

Is there anything you wish you had done, or you would like to see done locally now that you are stepping down?

Something which affects many people across these islands, but certainly in Ross, Skye and Lochaber, has been the injustice to the WASPI women in the 1950s: women that were denied justice in achieving their pension rights. We ran out of time, even though the ombudsman has ruled against the government that there had been maladministration, so that is going to have to be resolved when parliament returns. From a personal point of view, something I have been engaged with more recently is trying to get footballers with dementia, when it has been sports related, to have that classified as an industrial injury so they can get the support they need. Again, that is a campaign I have been working tirelessly on over the last while, so we will see what happens in that.

You were elected in 2015, and a lot has been written and said about that particular campaign - and Charles Kennedy was a popular figure in Lochaber. You’ve spoken about it before, but is there anything you want to say on that?

I was honoured to follow Charles Kennedy as the MP for the constituency, and I can remember on the election night the discussions we had and the good wishes he had for me. Charles is someone that I was fortunate enough to meet on a number of occasions over a long period of time, and we

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should respect and reflect on the legacy of the man and the respect that I had for him. My election leaflets are a matter of public record, and there is certainly nothing in the way that I did that that I would have any particular issue with.

There are times when criticism can get personal. How does an MP cope with that?

It is a topic I have spoken about on a number of occasions over a long period of time, but particularly recently: I have actually been put on the Committee of Standards in Public Life, so of course we reflect on these things on an ongoing basis. But it troubles me that our political discourse has become as toxic as it has. Everything that we see in social media, particularly in what was known as Twitter, is just a cesspit, and I am deeply worried about where this is taking us and what that means in terms of the encouragement for people to come into public life because you really need to have a thick skin. Of course people should be able to make complaints as appropriate against anybody in public life, any politician, but at the moment seeing what happens on social media, and sometimes in the media as well, is deeply disquieting. We also had the situation over the SNP's opposition, the whole stramash, over the votes that took place on the issue of Gaza. I have to say it was probably more unpleasant that day in parliament than anything I saw over the Brexit period. So I think there is a responsibility on all of us - those of us in public life, those of us in the media - to try and make sure we can actually have more of a reasoned and measured debate that respects all opinions.

Does criticism affect you personally?

I have never made a big issue of commenting on what happens to myself. You made reference to 2015: actually, I was getting death threats in the middle of that campaign. I have got a very good idea as to where they emanated from, but I am going to leave that. But I have also had two people that have been found guilty of inappropriate behaviour towards me in the time I was an MP. One was not just in relation to myself, but other politicians as well, and the individual served 12 months as a consequence of that. The other one, which were attacks just on myself, led to someone getting a 12-month suspended sentence. So, like everybody else - and I am not saying by any stretch of the imagination that what I have experienced is any worse than anybody else, it is not - people in public life can become a target now.

Have your own opinions of politics changed over time, especially after going to the House of Commons?

One of the things I want to do is to make sure we argue the case for independence, and one of the things I have done repeatedly is make the point that we need to push the economic case: we need to demonstrate that Scotland can be a much wealthier country. But the point about having a respectful debate is really important. We live in a divided society, and I think it is incumbent upon all of us to try and cross that divide. I know there was some media commentary last week because I publicly gave Theresa May a hug in the chamber last Friday as we departed parliament. But I have always sought to treat people with respect because I think that is the right thing to do and to get things done in parliament. What we were able to do over the Magnitsky Act, for example, that those that are guilty of human rights abuses can not come to the United Kingdom, was actually a coalition of myself, Margaret Hodge and Dominic Raab: one Labour, one SNP, one Conservative. Yes, argue, argue in the interests of your constituents, argue for the things you believe in, but when you come through the doors of the chamber, leave that behind because at the end of the day, everyone that is in that place is elected to serve their constituents on the basis we are trying to provide a public service.

Former MP for Ross, Skye and Lochaber Ian Blackford.

When you made your leaving valedictory speech, you mentioned that when you first arrived in parliament you asked somebody 'What do I do?'. Is it really the case that when new MPs come in they do not actually know what they are doing?

That is a good question. I think it's probably yes. That conversation was simply because when we went from six to 56 MPs we were then in a position that we were speaking early in every debate. But quite often you would be asked to speak on things that, quite frankly, you probably had limited experience or knowledge of. I have to say in this particular case it was a Conservative MP, Andrew Percy, who has also stood down, who was very helpful in giving me advice on what to do. That comes back to what I was saying about the relationships that exist across the house.

How did you balance the different pulls of working in London, representing the SNP and having a rural constituency?

With difficulty. I would say you put yourself up for that role and it was a particular privilege of being a constituency MP and also the party leader for five years over that time, but I will be honest, it was absolutely exhausting. There was no down time: you would be coming back to the constituency, and it was really important you gave proper regard to the constituency, but it meant when I got back home I was still working, pretty well 24/7. When I stood down as SNP Westminster Leader I had to recognise I had become someone that had been absolutely fully consumed with work, with no time for anything else. There has been a bit of balance over the course of the last 18 months, given that I have not been fulfilling that role.

What happens next for you?

We will wait to see. I have not been actively looking for other roles. I have had a couple of approaches, but I want to take time to consider exactly what I am going to do. Although I am not an elected politician, I still have a role as the SNP business ambassador, so I will still be taking care of my responsibilities in that regard in the upcoming period.

Do you have a final message for the people of Ross, Skye, and Lochaber as you depart?

Simply thank you very much for the opportunity to serve as your Member of Parliament. It has been an absolute honour to be able to do so. I hope I have tried to represent people to the best of my abilities, and it has been an opportunity of a lifetime to do that.

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