

Blether-In



Be the change you want to see...

by
Gordon
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INTERNATIONAL Women's Day has evolved over the last century from a general 'women's rights' commemoration to the modern day themed celebration of women's achievements in various global and localised contexts. Here in Scotland we have been blessed with many women who have achieved great things over the years – Mary Slessor, Mary Ann Baxter, Jane Haining and Winnie Ewing are just four names that spring readily to mind.

These are the type of women we can identify as inspirational because they are prominent politicians or historical figures, and we can read about them or see them on TV regularly. Yet there are thousands of women all over Scotland 'doing their bit' every day that never come to the attention of a wider audience. Indeed, most of them are happy with that because they do not seek fame or advancement, their reward is simply 'making a difference'.

As all of these women are just quietly working away, we might be tempted to think that some of these smaller scale, localised activities are only 'making a difference' in a very minor way. But things can grow, and gain momentum, and... maybe even bring down a government? ...

When Fiona McArthur was a young mother she was a regular visitor to a playgroup in Pollokshields. Each day the women would swap stories and talk about the issues of the day. The main issue on most of these days was the Poll Tax – yes, this was the 1980s and Scotland was being experimented on by Thatcher's Tory party. The women were outraged by the inherent unfairness of the hated tax and decided enough was enough. So, following the old Scottish maxim of 'if ye want something daein, dae it yersel', they duly got themselves organised and started to 'dae something'!

"It started with the playgroup in Darnley Street, and maybe five or six women got involved. There were two paid workers and the rest of us were mothers who took turns gluing bits of paper together and making stuff, and we did fundraising, circulated clothes and toys and all sorts of things. A few of the women were chatting about the Poll Tax and how terrible this was, and they said, 'let's get a meeting together'. I said I'd come along and we got around 80 people in a room at the local clinic, it was very well attended. From that we recruited a group of people, about eight or ten of us, to go round and talk to other groups, and they became the spokespeople for *Pollokshields Against the Poll Tax*. There were meetings all over Glasgow, but by the time it reached the McLellan Galleries it had become massive, and that was where the political left got involved. There was a huge presence of the left and, going in, you ran the gauntlet.

The Poll Tax protests grew and, arguably, were the trigger for the downfall of the Thatcher government

From a very informal movement, just local people speaking to local people, suddenly there were these hard core international socialists, Marxists, and others. I remember very clearly coming through thinking this is a different kind of thing here, and that was a shame. But still the Pollokshields people went around and the meetings went on and we did the non-payment campaign and we chased people along. I chapped on doors in different places in Pollokshields and depending on where you were... if you were in the wealthy bit they were kind of, well, there was not necessarily such a great reception! But ordinary families, maybe with grown up children working and grandparents living with them, they just didn't have the income to pay all this."

It's a matter of public record how the Poll Tax protests grew and, arguably, were the trigger for the downfall of the Thatcher government. When asked for her enduring opinion of Margaret Thatcher, there's a long, drawn-out groan before Fiona acknowledges it would be unprintable! "An appalling human being, but I'm sure there are some women, who have different political persuasions from mine, would say that she was inspirational. The people that inspire me are people who are not in the public eye. I once had to interview a 17-year-old in a flat in Dundee who was looking after five children, siblings and cousins, while putting herself through college. She was the care giver to these children due to a dysfunctional family situation. That flat was due for demolition, but it was spanking clean, there was food on the table, it was orderly, and the children were well fed and organised and doing well at school - this wee girl would inspire me. Also, people like Mhairi Black, and where she's come from ... she's an inspiration."



L to R: Fiona McArthur, Lynne Devine, Ian Dickson, and Euan McArthur, with Maisie (the even wee-er ginger dug!) in front



Maisie!

Even in retirement this inspirational woman is still 'doing her bit'



Credit: Phil Maxwell

Fiona's interest in politics was initially sparked by her enlightened head teacher at Knoxland Primary School who took her and her 12-year-old classmates to a county council meeting, as he recognised how important it was for youngsters to engage with politics. Then, when she was selected to debate Scottish Independence at her secondary school, Dumbarton Academy, she did her research and concluded that this was something she did truly believe in. "I made my own opinions from a very early age. I didn't take my perspective from my parents. I was really concerned about the qualifying exam, for example, and I desperately wanted comprehensive education to appear. I called the head girl a snob because she didn't want the 'riff-raff' coming in to our school! I just thought look, you've got to give people opportunities. People develop at different ages, some people don't deal with exams very well, and this is not fair to label somebody at 12-years-old. Of my 48 class members, one person failed their 'qually'. We were a really tight knit class yet that one guy had to go to a different school. That was wrong. You've got to allow folk opportunities in life. I feel it's important to involve young people in the political process very early. I strongly endorse what we've done by lowering the voting age in Scotland. What the Tories say about this is pure hypocrisy. If you're 16 and a member of the Tory party then you can vote in the leader. So, as usual with that lot, it's just mince!"

After graduating from Stirling University, Fiona's interest in social justice eventually led her into a career in the voluntary sector where she was able to use her economics and marketing skills and knowledge to help empower people from disadvantaged backgrounds by supporting various projects. But there wasn't the opportunity to do much about formal political involvement at that time. "In the west of Scotland if you weren't in the Labour Party then you got absolutely nowhere. I didn't want to join the Labour Party and it wouldn't have been possible to join another party. When our project was coming to the end of its funding, probably around 1996, I finally decided to 'take a stand' and joined Cathcart SNP. I wasn't an active member - I only went to one meeting! When I eventually relocated to Forfar I got more involved. I went to my first party conference and was completely hooked!"

Fast-forward a few years and even in retirement this inspirational woman is still 'doing her bit'. As a founder member of Yes Forfar's information hub, the *Blether-In*, Fiona is still working quietly away persuading the good folk of Angus that Scotland should be in control of its own destiny. "The day after the first Independence Referendum, in 2014, I was already galvanising the troops - I was telling everyone this is not the end of the story. It was Twitter and Facebook that picked me up - I just thought no, no, there's a flicker, there's definitely life here. We'd taken all the Yes stuff off our car and then put it all back on again two days later! New people joined our branch, the conferences were wonderful and the amount of dialogue that took place was



Ian, Euan, Fiona and Lynne 'blethering' with two drop-in visitors



Shop front



Fiona reluctantly facing camera

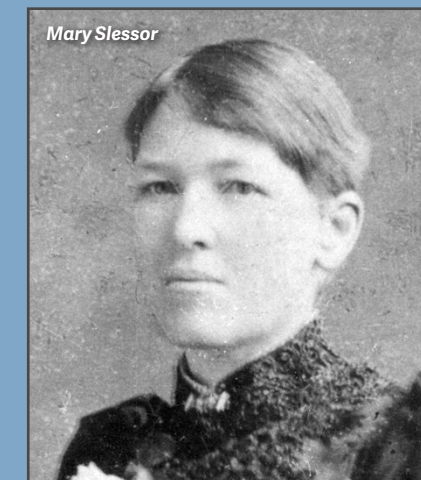
amazing. Forfar is quite a difficult area - there's a lot of 'small c' conservatives and it can feel like pushing water uphill. Coming from Glasgow I really can't get my head round it. Nobody talks about anything! Many older women are loath to talk about politics - I've seen it on our stalls and even in my exercise class! We get couples at the Yes stall and the women will just say 'ask him!' Women of a certain age have either become disengaged with the political process, or they keep their own counsel. There are loads of women of my generation who are educated or who read a lot, they're interested in politics, they see the possibilities. But, equally, there's a lot of people who don't read a lot and don't see the possibilities. And they don't want to talk about what they feel. We have very strong women within our group, and it's a good mix, but I do despair. We felt we needed a base to maybe stimulate some interest and one of our members came up with the idea of opening a shop, the *Blether-In*. We're ticking along just waiting for the starting gun to be fired!"

Not every woman can be Nicola Sturgeon, and not every woman wants to be. It takes a particular character to put up with the public scrutiny and the goldfish bowl existence that goes with that sort of territory. At the other end of the spectrum there's wannabees like Michelle Mone, actively seeking the publicity whilst contributing the square root of hee-haw to our society. (And who now, incidentally, has a say on Brexit that is denied to our elected representatives!) But everyone can be a Fiona McArthur by contributing their energies to the causes most important to them. *Be the change you want to see* seems to encapsulate Fiona's attitude and if that's not inspirational, then the game really is a bogey!

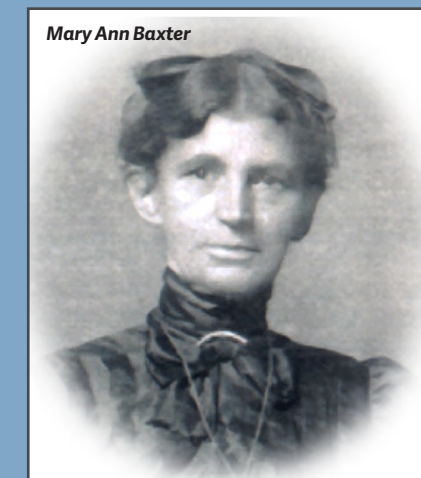
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Jane Haining



Mary Slessor



Mary Ann Baxter



Winnie Ewing