



The Editor recently interviewed the MP for Darlington, Jenny Chapman. Here is a summary of their conversation.

Ed: You are very much a Darlington lass aren't you? Can you tell us a little bit about your background?

JC: There's nothing of any great excitement in my background, but I grew up in Darlington and went to Mowden School and Hummersknott.

Ed: Were you born in Darlington?

JC: No – I wasn't born here. Due to a distinct lack of foresight on my parents' part I was born in Surrey. The South! But I lived in Darlington from the age of eight. My parents worked for the Health Service – they were both nurses - and we moved around a fair bit until I was eight. They both took the view that we should stay in one place for our education and I've lived in Darlington since then. A lot of people who work in the Memorial will know my Mum and Dad. My Mum used to work on ward 52 at the Memorial and then moved over to Greenbank before it closed. As a teenager I was never entirely sure what my Dad did, but I think he worked in Personnel.

Ed: You went to Q.E. [Queen Elizabeth Sixth Form College, Darlington], but then what did you do?

JC: Then I went to Brunel University and did a Psychology degree and I worked in the Prison Service – at Frankland Prison in Durham and Dartmoor Prison in Devon.

Ed: My researches tell me you did a degree in Archeology. How did you come to be doing that?

JC: That was quite a few years later. I'd always been interested in Archeology, and

the medieval period particularly. Durham University has a very good Archeology department and I did a Masters degree in Medieval Archeology part time.

Ed: That was for fun?

JC: That was for fun, and it was fascinating. It's been no use whatever in terms of employment but I found it a very satisfying thing to do, and it's really come into its own in the last few years. There used to be a stark divide between historians and archaeologists, but that is blurring now, and you find historians like Lucy Worsley, who is not just a TV personality but very much looking at artefacts and buildings and costumes, and not just documents. Archeology is the new gardening!

Ed: So do you still dabble in Archeology a bit?

JC: Not with a trowel! But especially working in the Palace of Westminster, history is all around and there is archaeology everywhere there.

Ed: Although most of it is Victorian!

JC: Indeed, but there is of course Westminster Hall, and most people have that as their favourite space there. And if you are fortunate enough to be there after everyone has gone home late at night, and it's dark, it's a wonderful place.

Ed: Do you have politics in your genes?

JC: My Dad I suppose was quite political as we were growing up – in his views. I grew up in the 80s with the Miners' strike, and it was a time when people had quite decided views and there wasn't much of a centre ground. I think you couldn't really escape

politics. Very much later my Mum was a local councillor in Darlington, but I think she would accept that in my early life it was more my Dad who influenced me. But I think some of that was because he was from Middlesbrough, brought up in South Bank and found himself living in the South East through his work. Part of retaining your identity was supporting the Labour movement.

Ed: So how did you come to be more actively involved in politics?

JC: Through work. After university I got the opportunity to work for Alan Milburn in Darlington. I didn't really understand quite what my role would be. It was 1997 which was an exciting year in politics and he was an exciting person to be around. I had great opportunities through that, and got to see what the life of somebody in a senior ministerial position could be like. I vowed never ever to go near an elected position!

Ed: So how did you come to break your vow?

JC: I had some babies, and was wondering how to continue any sort of employed role I could do in my own name. Through working for Alan I came to see that the role of local councillor was one that was interesting and where you could make a difference and be involved in local issues. So I did that for three years. The opportunity came to stand for parliament and that's when I stopped being a councillor. But it happened very quickly. I found out at Christmas that I had secured the nomination to be the Labour candidate and the election was in May. I was the Cabinet member for children and young people on Darlington Council, and I stood down from that immediately and from the Council after the General Election.

Ed: How did you find it going through a General Election campaign?

JC: It is exhausting – and you are treated like a product! If you're not used to it, it is quite strange seeing your name on leaflets, posters and what have you, and that's a bit odd. The relentlessness of it is something that takes you aback at first. It is every day and every night and there is no break. Especially now with 24/7 media you just can't escape. There's no down time during an election. And although I've been a volunteer in elections many times, to be the candidate is a very different experience. But you have a team around you, a team of my friends, and I was very well supported.

Ed: Did Alan Milburn get involved in your campaign, or did he take a back seat?

JC: He very much took a back seat. He decided to withdraw completely, and I think it can be confusing for voters and not all that helpful to have the retiring member getting involved. But he was always very supportive on a personal level. I remember on election day texting him and saying "this is all going horribly wrong, it's all been a big mistake". But he said "no – you will feel that every time". He said that he felt that at every election. And he won four general elections in Darlington, but every time he felt the same – even 1997.

Ed: So did you ever seriously doubt the outcome?

JC: Definitely—Iwasneverconfident. Darlington was Conservative from 1983 – 1992, and I now see our former MP Michael Fallon very regularly, which is strange, but nice! So I was never complacent – certainly not – and I would always consider Darlington to be a marginal seat. Sometimes the majorities that Alan won concealed the fact that there are people who switch at each election, and there's a lot of them in Darlington, and you have to give them some very good reasons to vote for you.

Ed: You've got to know Alan Milburn's Conservative predecessor. Would you say there is a certain camaraderie amongst MPs regardless of party?

JC: There can be, but there are some long held disagreements, feuds and personal animosity too! But there are more friendships than people imagine, particularly amongst MPs who are elected in the same year who are going through a similar experience – finding your way around, learning how committees work and the rules of the place. You are learning that together regardless of political party. So members of the same intake are more likely to get to know one another across party lines, which is probably a good thing – it shows there is some humanity there after all!

Ed: How long had you been a member before you made your maiden speech?

JC: Not long. I was quite keen to get it out of the way actually, because I thought the longer I left it, the more nerve-wracking it would be. So I did it after three weeks as part of the Queen's Speech debate.

Ed: Do you have to indicate to the Speaker beforehand that you would like to make your maiden speech?

JC: Whenever you want to make a speech, as opposed to just asking a question, you must always write to the Speaker in advance and explain why you want to make this speech and what particular interest you have. You don't have to do that, but it increases your chances if you do it that way and you have to be incredibly courteous. As well as that, you must attend the chamber from the beginning of the debate – you can't just walk in half way through and expect to be called. There is a great emphasis on courtesy and manners. You must listen to the speakers before you, then you stand up at the end of everybody else's speech,

and you may be called next, but usually you don't know if you're going to be next or not. So you could be standing up and down after speeches for a couple of hours and then suddenly your name is called – by which point you've drifted off!

Ed: So you still have to catch the Speaker's eye, even if you've written to him?

JC: Yes – and frequently members are disappointed. They have crafted a beautiful speech but never get to give it because there are more speakers than time allows. That happened to me with my maiden speech. I sat there for four or five hours waiting to give it but was unable to do so. So I had to come back the next day and go through the whole stress of it again. So there are peculiarities – quite archaic – ways of operating, but maybe some people think of that as being quite charming!

Ed: Do you have any political ambitions, or are you quite happy being an MP?

JC: I've never had any political ambitions, and I wouldn't have sought to be elected as an MP anywhere else. It's just that the incumbent happened to be resigning, and it's not something I ever sought out. It would be quite odd having become a local MP then to announce I wanted to be Home Secretary. So for me it's about being a good local MP.

Ed: Other than being an MP, how do you spend your time?

JC: That's it really. That's one of the definite down sides. You do get to do lots of things you wouldn't otherwise get to do. Last week end I was in a bee keeper's outfit looking at bee hives which was interesting. You get to do all sorts of activities. Someone once said to me it's a bit like being a Blue Peter presenter! But what you don't get is very much free time, and that without a doubt is

the big down side of being elected, and you don't get anonymity, even for somebody who is a relatively low profile Member of Parliament. Doing your shopping, you have to accept that people will approach you.

Ed: So you don't have time to pursue any interests or hobbies?

JC: Not especially. I'm still interested in Archeology, and I like to decorate cakes – and I've got young kids. People with young kids and jobs don't have free time!

Ed: How old are your children?

JC: They're six and eight.

Ed: Presumably you've got help of some sort?

JC: My Mum is very good, and because I grew up in Darlington I've got friends with children of similar ages and we help each other out. And I have to say they probably help me out more than I help them at the moment.

Ed: So presumably you value the relatively long recesses?

JC: Very much so. Parliament rose at the end of July and we returned on September 6th. I'm very fortunate to have that because it means I can be at home with the children over the summer holidays. My Mum never had that – she was a nurse. She was never at home on Christmas day or through the summer. So it's swings and roundabouts. I have to be in London for part of the week and the payback is I get to be at home for the summer.

Ed: During the recess is there still "MP work" to do or can you relax?

JC: No, to relax you have to go away. You can't relax and be here. If you live in the constituency – as I do – that responsibility will fill any time you have. There's always someone who wants to see me, and that just goes with the job. But I like that side of it

too – that's what attracted me to do the job. You have to go on holiday to get time off!

Ed: So do you have any favourite holiday destinations?

JC: I'll go anywhere – I don't care. I'll go to Hartlepool! But somewhere nice and sunny with a beach is nice. I like the Lake District. We don't tend to go to the same place every time. But I've never had a holiday which I haven't enjoyed.

Ed: Your parents both worked in the NHS and you worked for Alan Milburn who was Secretary of State for Health. Has that given you insight into health issues?

JC: I'd like to say it had, but to be truthful, health policy is an incredibly complex area, and I could never call myself particularly well-informed about it. I've probably learned more since being elected because there have been so many local issues. Also we've had the reform of the Health Service which has been incredibly high profile and controversial. So you can't avoid becoming more informed.

Ed: Being radical – do you think it is the duty of the Government to provide healthcare?

JC: Yes I do. I don't think they always have to be the provider, but they have a responsibility to make sure it's available and free at the point of delivery and of an appropriate quality. So they don't actually have to provide everything, and they don't now, but they do have absolutely the duty to ensure that people who need it can access it and that it's the right standard.

Ed: In our local area, how do you think the NHS will look in five or in ten years' time?

JC: I think that's an impossible question to answer. There are pressures from outside the Health Service which will have a big influence on that. Developments in care, in drugs, in treatments and technology will make a difference to that too. The wisdom seems to be that – maybe in more than five

years' time – we will have fewer hospitals, bigger hospitals and more specialist units. But we've had very sure predictions in the past about what will happen which haven't materialised – so who knows? The pendulum may well swing back!

Ed: You've been involved in some of the discussions about acute stroke care in our area. What are your thoughts about that?

JC: Well, the consultation is now complete. To my mind, it's not been the best performed consultation that I've ever seen. It's well known that I've got concerns about the proposals and would prefer to see the service centred in Darlington. That remains my view. Whether that is what happens, we don't yet know.

Ed: To give us an idea of the sort of person you are, I always like to ask what book you would take with you to the mythical desert island?

JC: Well assuming I get the Bible and the complete works of Shakespeare, my answer this week would be *Love all people*¹. It's about Bill Hicks, who is an American comedian. It's a collection of some of his performances, interviews and poetry. It's keeping me awake laughing at night!

Ed: So do you consider yourself quite a reader?

JC: Yes, I read a lot – all kinds of stuff - a mixture of fiction and non-fiction. Recently, obviously I've read Tony Blair's book, Chris Mullin's diaries, Alastair Campbell's diaries. I think I've reached my limit for analysis of the Blair years!

Ed: You've not read Alistair Darling's *Back from the Brink*?

JC: I was chatting to Alistair in the Tea Room the other day, and I thought I'm not going to bother reading the book – I'm not sure what else there is to find out! So I will probably skip that one – political biography I think I've done to death now. But I'm reading a very good book now by David Marquand about the history of British democracy² which is great – a sort of history revision of the politics of the twentieth century. I like Tim Winton for fiction – he's an Australian who writes superb books.

So yes – I do like to read, but I spend a lot of time on trains so I get the opportunity!

Ed: Thank you very much for talking to me.

References:

1. Love all people: Letters, Lyrics, Routines. Bill Hicks, Constable (2004)
2. Britain Since 1918: The Strange Career of British Democracy. David Marquand, Phoenix (2009)