

Simon Danczuk, MP



Simon Danczuk, Sociology, 1992 (Cartmel) is Labour MP for Rochdale. He grew up in Hapton, a village close to Burnley. His parents parted when he was 5 and he lived with his mother and elder brother in Hapton until they moved to Padiham when he was 11.

His childhood was tough: the family lived on benefits and money was very tight. His GCE results were poor – he managed one pass in English – and he then went to work in a local factory. A chance encounter with his former English teacher, who urged him to consider going to university, led to his long journey through GCEs at night to an Open College Foundation Course in Sociology and English Literature.

Simon joined the Labour Movement at the age of 16, initially as a union member and for over 20 years as a member of the Labour Party. In 1999 Simon co-founded Vision Twentyone.

Professor Roger Penn (Professor of Economic Sociology and Statistics), one of his former tutors, talks to him.

RP: What made you think about coming to Lancaster?

SD: Open College took us to Lancaster to show us the University. That was important for me.

RP: What did you think about the place?

SD: It was scary. There was a lot of concrete but the people were very friendly. I chose Sociology at Lancaster over Salford because Lancaster had a better reputation. I came as a full time student and commuted with other students from Darwen. I worked behind a bar at night and at weekends to help finance my studies. In the holidays I worked as a labourer.

RP: How did you get on in Sociology?

SD: I really enjoyed the course. I found industrial relations interesting too. My sociology degree had a powerful impact on my career – I set up a social research agency as a direct consequence of that. Sociology really prepares you for wanting to learn more and to investigate what's going on around you.

RP: How did your degree help your career in social research?

SD: We commissioned and undertook a lot of primary research. At least I understood what was going on. You instilled in us the practical nature of research – not just the theoretical aspect. It was very helpful in all those jobs.

RP: Can you outline how the success of Vision Twentyone was influenced by your degree?

SD: I co-founded this in 1999. Now it has around 20 employees. We concentrated on research and consultancy with hard to reach groups. This became our niche. For example, if a local authority wanted to research homelessness, they would interview hostel managers and perhaps

a couple of homeless people. At Lancaster I learned that quantification was important. In Camden we interviewed well over 100 homeless people and when we analyzed drug use in Liverpool and Manchester we interviewed over 400 users.

You need to undertake primary research and to speak to people directly. This approach has also given me an advantage as an MP.

RP: Can you tell me about your early political career?

SD: I first stood as a candidate for Blackburn with Darwen Council during my finals at Lancaster. I lost, but two years later I was successful and became councillor for Earcroft. What I learned was that knocking on doors is vital. It was also crucial for winning in Rochdale. I think you can win seats considered unwinnable by connecting with the electorate on the doorstep.

RP: How did you find time to do all of this?

SD: I cram a lot in!! I learned some of that at Lancaster as a mature student with restricted time.

RP: How did you become Labour MP for Rochdale?

SD: I had it in my mind to stand for Parliament for some time. In 2005 I decided to try and find a seat. Rochdale suited me as it is in Lancashire and I have lived and worked in the county for all my life. It represented a challenge as Labour had lost the seat in the 2005 General Election and I was attracted to the possibility of winning it back. I was selected by Labour in 2007 and moved permanently to the town.

RP: Your election campaign received a great deal of publicity after the comments Gordon Brown made after meeting Mrs Duffy whilst canvassing. What are your thoughts on that now?

SD: Well it raised my profile!! I appeared on the front page of the Wall Street Journal. After being elected I went to visit her and she felt sorry for Gordon and felt he had made a mess of things. She is now a Labour Party member in Rochdale.

RP: Were her views on immigration unusual?

SD: Not at all. It was the great unspoken policy at the last election amongst all the major parties. People were [and remain] extremely concerned about it. Labour had not been effective in explaining their new immigration policy based on points. They were too relaxed. The management of the system was poor. Mrs Duffy spoke for a very big group of people.

RP: Why do you think you won?

SD: We emphasised local issues. I think you should campaign on local issues. You do not know what they are until you're on the doorstep. It's important to speak directly to people and this connects strongly with my sociological training at Lancaster.

RP: What is it like being an MP?

SD: The most exciting part is the chance to learn about a whole range of things. I visited Bangladesh as a candidate. The other week I sat in a mosque whilst prayers took place. That was an interesting experience. I also enjoy helping people sort out their problems. In some ways arriving in Westminster was like coming to Lancaster. I felt as if a mistake had been made. I am different from a good proportion of MPs in terms of my background and experiences. Now I feel far more comfortable there.

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