



## Episode #11: Poverty, politics and activism – Tabitha Morton

*Welcome to Poverty Unpacked podcast series in which we discuss the hidden sides of poverty. In conversation with others, we explore how poverty affects the mind, relationships, emotions and society as a whole, and what can be done to change it.*

*In this episode, I will be speaking with Tabitha Morton. Tabitha is deputy leader of the Women's Equality Party in the UK, and CEO of More United, a cross-party movement that supports grassroots political campaigning. Now a politician and activist, Tabitha grew up in a disadvantaged neighbourhood in Liverpool, and a family that was struggling to make ends meet. We talk about her journey into politics, about children's life chances now compared to when she was growing up, and how policymaking needs to change to really improve people's lives.*

**KR: Tabitha, thank you very much for joining the podcast. A real pleasure to have you with us. Preparing for this conversation, it's obvious that you have a really impressive CV, you're the deputy leader for the Women's Equality Party, the CEO of More United, you stood for mayor in Liverpool in 2017. So lots to talk about. And I guess following on from your list of everything that you do at the moment, my first question is about your journey getting there. And if you could tell us a little bit about how you got to where you are.**

TM: Thank you for the opportunity to share. And that's been one of the strangest things about getting into politics is that growing up with my background – to forge a career to be successful in inverted commas, I hid my story. So it was no one wanted to hear that I left school at 10. And I've had no formal education. Since then no one wants to hear I grew up on a council estate, no one wanted to hear how like, you know, I had hand down clothes and all that sort of stuff. Getting into politics, and activism, has turned that on its head so much. And actually, you know, the personal is political. And we are nothing if we are not the things that have made us and shaped us and actually to show people that you understand some of what they're going through, because you can never completely walk in someone else's shoes by just looking at them. That's really helped.

And the other thing I just wanted to think about as well. And that given my age when I was growing up in Liverpool in the 1980s, and so hated the fact that the government had, you just need to pull yourself up by your bootstraps and make it work. I don't know whether all listeners know this. But at the same time, the Thatcher government was so in despair at the militant Labour leadership in Liverpool, that they implemented something that they called managed decline. So they basically just left the city to rot. At the same time, the militant Labour government decided that they would, you know, that they ended up taking, making a political stance and virtually bankrupting the city. So my generation and the generations that came after me where, I saw firsthand, the political parties can tear places apart. And

it's the poorest suffer. So it's like, you know, it doesn't matter which side you're on the party of the people or the party of the capitalist, the poorest just lose out all of the time.

**KR: Well, that's very interesting. And a real lived understanding of how the politics that sometimes seems so far away actually play out in real life in real ways for people who need politicians stand behind them the most actually. Now, it's interesting that you mentioned growing up in the in the 80s, and how that played out for you living in in Liverpool. And in a way, certainly looking from the outside, it seems like you are almost a poster child of a form of social mobility you've just described growing up. Here you are doing all these amazing things. Now in terms of social mobility and comparing you growing up to children growing up at the moments, how do you see that comparison? Do you think children have more chances now or fewer chances than then back then?**

TM: It's a really good question. Unfortunately, I don't think we've moved at far at all. I think if anything, we've gone backwards because what I didn't have to contend with was the digital world. So for example, today, if you haven't got access to data packages, Wi Fi laptops, you know, you get left behind as a young person. And something when I was preparing for this, I was you know, we talk a lot today about how we make policy that makes it harder for people. So for example, if you are low income, you can go on to a card meter to pay for your energy and you end up paying more for your energy than you would if you actually have more money. And I was thinking about when I was a kid, we used to have these slot meters where you put a pound or 50p in to get your gas electricity. And as kids, when the gas man or the electricity man came to empty the meters, we thought it was like Christmas, because we got all this money back. Well, what I didn't realise as a kid obviously is my parents didn't have that money to spend in the first place. They were paying 25% more for their energy. And then they could, they needed to, but at least back then they got it back 40 years on, people are not even getting a rebate. They're just paying more money.

And I also think I was unusual story of going on to become, you know, to have a career and I was in the commercial sector for a very long time before coming into the not for profit. And the years and years of deprivation and poverty and inflicted on policymaking where people were never consulted with they were talked down to it creates a culture where people believe for generations that they cannot be more than they are. And then when somebody does do something that's different, then you're not accepted in your community anymore. Because you're seen as one of those, you're seen as we can only ever be the workers, we can never be the managers because the managers have it. And it's this. It's this constant, zero-sum game where everyone has to be played off against each other instead of there is talent in every walk of life. There's talent in every race, in every sexuality and every gender. But we say this is the model of success. It's often a white, upper class, middle class, well-educated man. And everything else is on a sliding scale then so. So it's a very rambling answer to your question. But I think that young people today are worse off than before. But we are still pitting societies and groups of people against each other.

**KR: And if I can ask you about your own experience in being pigeon holed, really, because before you mentioned that, as you were going into politics, and maybe also in your commercial job previously, you wouldn't tell anyone about how you were growing up or what your**

**experience was as a child? How does that then compare to telling people back home, if you will, about the career that you've built? And maybe not feeling comfortable telling that story either? How did you manage to overcome these? Or do you think you're still finding your way with that on a daily basis?**

TM: Yeah, I think I think we really, we're constantly evolving as humans, aren't we? I think in my commercial career, I think, I think I missed out on bringing my whole self to work. I am lesbian, but I didn't come out till I was 39. And I think I missed out on a lot by not being my true self at work. I also think by not telling people that I had any education, I was terrified that they would then look down on me, instead of going 'look at what you've achieved'. Despite that, also I feel a certain responsibility that, that we've got to break these molds. That's what makes a politician that's what makes an activist that's what makes somebody who is doing X, Y, or Z at any job, because we all have the potential to do that. So yeah, I think it's not easy. It feels a bit sort of braggy. Sometimes, I think I can always come back to why am I doing this? Am I doing this to show off? Or am I doing this? Because this helps to further a story to further a narrative to drive home, why we need to answer some of the like, barbaric policies that this government has put in place.

**KR: Yeah, let me pick up on that point about some of the policies that are in place at the moment that have been put in place over the last 10 years, with lots of welfare cuts. But not only just cutting down on services, but with that, also, as you say, certain morality about how people should live their lives imposed by people who probably don't know what it is to live those lives. So what are some of the things that you think are really challenging for people at the moments in how policies play out and then to how they should be changed?**

TM: There's an amazing woman that I would encourage our listeners to go and do some research on her name is Eleanor Rathbone. And she was she was a suffragette from Liverpool. And she is credited with bringing the family allowance in in 1945. So she stood as an independent MP her entire career. And she was a lesbian as well. So, you know, I don't make any parallels here. But her family were quite wealthy back in Liverpool, and they were they were reformers there. So they were society reformers. And I'm not saying for one second they got this right because I'm sure they've had very Victorian views about how that should have happened. But Eleanor Rathbone very quickly worked out that if women had access to a pot of money, they could make decisions about how that was spent. So rather than giving them a pack of food, or some clothing, or a roof over the head, it's like, here's some money, you now have the agency to decide what you do with that money. And that was very progressive thinking because she got those ideas, not from her lived experience, because she had a very privileged life. She got that experience from listening to the women in Liverpool, who was struggling, whose husbands spent all of their money in the pubs who gave them like the bare minimum to get by with and they had no agency and certainly those women who were single, who'd had children who were not married, they were in an even worse predicament. So she fought really, really hard for the family allowance that had to be given to women only. And obviously, that's all been thrown out of the window with Universal Credit now. And I think that's fast forwards to the amazing work that Marcus Rashford did leading that campaign last year about free school meals and the women's equality party. We're right behind him on this but you know, ourselves and Marcus Rashford, we, we have to say that that's a sticking plaster. That's not getting to the actual cause, why the parents not got enough money to do this, because many

of those parents are working. So I think there's a piece around policymaking. But we also have to look at the part that capitalism plays as well. And about the fact that so many people who are on benefits are actually working, because they're on Zero Hour contracts. And they aren't in stable contracts, if they if they do have them and they're on minimum wage.

**KR: Earlier we also spoke about the two child limit for child allowance, which is something that's come in in recent years. But this exception that if there are more children in your family because of rape, or violent relations, an exception can be made. But of course, you then have to make very painful claims to that. Is that something that you think is representative of wider developments in how policies particularly for people, more vulnerable families developing over the last five years with the government that's in place?**

TM: Yes, I think it's a moral judgement. And it's a judgement on what they think family should be. And it's also a complete lack of understanding of survivors of violence, you know, the 101 of supporting survivors is that you tell your story, if you want to, and when you want to. And that is taken out of your hands, if the choice is between feeding and clothing and caring for your child. You know that that's one example. But we've also got the other policy, which I think is abhorrent in this country as well for migrant women, and where they have no recourse to public funds. So if women have unstable immigration status in this country, they can't even flee violence in the home, because the local authorities are not allowed to support them. And also it does something around this this sort of like people with large families, it links into some moral judgments.

And I do a lot, a lot of work around ending violence against women and girls. And I also think that is seen as a phenomenon of women and families who live in poverty, this there is a link between football hooligans, lack of money, drugs and alcohol and violence. And it's very, very damaging, because there's a whole bunch of women who live middle-class upper-class lives, who then think I can't say this, because I don't fit that stereotype that. So I think there's a real damage of on total damage that you do by saying, This is what poverty looks like, this is how we control it. And this is how we legislate for it. You've got to step outside of like, what your lived experiences. And the fact that we have so few LGBT, disabled and black Members of Parliament. It says the world for me because they're not at the table. They're not making the decisions. So those communities and our communities are going to suffer

**KR: In terms of aspects of labelling people or stereotyping. And again, if you don't mind linking back to your own experience, do you think in some aspects, this has improved maybe around gender or sexuality, but in other areas is maybe deteriorated if we think about poverty or people living on benefits, quote, unquote, in your perception, how do you see that having develops over the last years?**

KR: Yeah, I don't think it's changed. It's something just came to my mind when I was researching for this and thinking about it is Last year, we saw a global support for the Black Lives Matter movement. And from that, I saw that kickback from so many people in this country that's got behind the All Lives Matter movement. And you quickly then had young black men and women paid off against young white men and women who were both living in poverty or both living and lower in some sort of deprivation. And that's so dangerous, because you cannot unpick the inequalities that I grew up and young white

people are growing up within Liverpool, with the young black man or woman who's grown up in Hackney, you have to understand the differences, some of the same. But there are also differences because racism has a play in that it has it has played out in that as well. So I think the labels are there, but they're even more intimately intertwined. Now that we have to sort of acknowledge that not everyone started a level playing field. So it's not like there's this one level of poverty. And everyone's just, we just move everyone up a step at a time. And that's social mobility. It's no, we're all starting at very different starting points as well. So the labelling is dangerous, because it then starts this zero sum game where you're played off against each other. And actually, I'm forever the optimist because I do believe that we probably got 96% in common and only 4% we don't agree on. But we're not set up to do that we're set to argue with each other constantly.

**KR: How can we then avoid that people are pitted against each other, and we sort of can find the common ground and 96% between us and move forward not to say that we should all agree on everything, but to avoid all those misunderstandings, but particularly, almost the, you know, the aggression against each other.**

TM: I think the first thing you have to do is the people who are making the decisions have to be different. So we have to change those people in power. So that's from local authorities through to national government. And we can also do that with activism as well. So it will take us time to appreciate change our Prime Minister and change our political parties, but we've almost always got this inevitability they'll always be the Conservative Party, they'll always be the Labour Party, they'll always be a two party state. Why? Doesn't have to be, you know, so why can we not change now? Why do we not grow a movement around what we've got in common? We've seen a growing, quite rightly, movement to address the urgent climate crisis. Why should that be in direct opposition to getting rid of poverty or ending violence against women and girls.

And that's why I'm a huge fan of Kate Raworth's donut economics. At the Women's Equality Party, we've ratified her ideas as our economic policy. And her concept is, you've got these goals to make the world equal. So everything from making all the things I've been talking about making sure kids have access to data, and we end violence, we've got a good criminal justice system, etc, etc. But we've also got a planet we've got to care for. And the economy, the bit that keeps us ticking cannot be the thing that explodes or implodes any of those things. So every time we make an economic decision, we have to say, Who are we damaging? They're here? Nobody good? Are we damaging the planet here? Oh, no, we're not. And if we started to look, every economic decision that we make, is not purely based on growth, just like how much money there's going to make us. But actually, who's going to benefit from this 99.9%. Fantastic. Move to 100%. Next time, but also we impacting on the planet, we start to change people's mindsets on that. And that's, I think that's a hugely unpopular because it's not socialism. It's not capitalism, it's somewhere in between, because, again, which hold there is only these two ways of being. And there's not there's this way where you can move to work together. But this takes a movement of people, this takes people coming together. This takes people voting differently, and saying my vote does count even a two party country. And we can make this change. I think just accepting what we've got is inevitable, is the way it will continue. If we say no, this is not inevitable. There was a way before this. And there's a way after this.

**KR: quite inspirational to think about how we can think differently because too often particularly watching the news and feeding ourselves on well-rehearsed messages, then we think it's inevitable. This is how the world looks and this is how it's going to look and I'm just one tiny piece within the whole apparatus. How am I going to make a change? So to hear you say that actually, if we come together, we can make a change for the better but also in a different way than it has been previously. I think it's really encouraging. Is there anything that you would like to close with that you would like to share with our listeners that you want to leave them with?**

TM: So you talked about, like, how would we how do we make this change, and I'm just a huge fan of activism. And, you know, activism can be everything from starting online petitions through to, you know, marching on Parliament's, you know, outside of COVID. And it doesn't always have to be people often feel like they have to be, you know, Angela Davis, or home. Or I'm just trying to think of like, there's millions of amazing activists, but you don't always have to be that you don't always have to be political, and what we're doing the women's equality party, we've launched our academy, and we're going to be training hundreds of people, women and young girls through our academy to become activists in their communities, because we think that's the way you make this change. And we don't care whether they join all the political parties, we don't care whether they join new political parties. What we want to do is get that message out there that you know, a feminist and female centric policymaking actually makes the world better for everybody.

**KR: Thank you, thank you very much. Do you have a site where can people find information about the activism initiative?**

TM: Okay, so I'm on Twitter, with Morton, WV, and then women's equality.org. Contact me or contact us through our webpages and just get involved.

**KR: Brilliant. Thank you so much for sharing your insights and for your time today.**

TM: It's been really brilliant. Thank you.

*Thank you for listening. If you liked what you heard, please follow us on Twitter or Instagram, and visit our website on poverty hyphen unpacked.org. We hope you'll join us again next time.*