

Clarion Ledger

Douglas Carswell has taken on political establishment, from Britain to Jackson



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Douglas Carswell, president & CEO of the Mississippi Center for Public Policy, was a member of the British Conservative Party for over a decade and co-founded Vote Leave, the official campaign that won the Brexit referendum. *Barbara Ledger*

One of the most influential, and interesting, characters in the drama of Mississippi politics is a man who cannot cast a vote in the state's elections, much less in the legislature.

Former United Kingdom Member of Parliament Douglas Carswell, once a key figure in intense political fights more than 4,500 miles away, has been president and CEO of the Mississippi Center for Public Policy (MCP) since January 2021, lobbying the state's lawmakers to shrink government and eliminate regulations, while also working to train a new generation of like-minded leaders.

"For my sins, I'm a Brit ... My main interest in politics in Britain was what we now call Brexit, getting Britain out of the European Union. And it was an epic battle. And we won, much to the annoyance of the elite opinion formers in the U.K.," Carswell said during an interview earlier this month. "Having achieved what I set out to achieve in politics, I quit. I stood down. I wasn't one of those people who wanted an endless drawn-out career in politics, an endless excuse to find reasons to live at public expense, so I stood down, and I then came to Mississippi."

A young life amid tyranny

Carswell was raised by his parents, both British doctors, in Uganda during the rule of notorious dictator Idi Amin.

His father, Wilson Carswell, was among the group of doctors who first identified HIV/AIDS in the country. His father is also named by Giles Foden in the acknowledgments for his novel "The Last King of Scotland," which details a fictional relationship between Amin and a British doctor named Nicolas Garrigan. It is widely thought that the senior Carswell served as the primary inspiration for that character. The role would later be played by James McAvoy in the award-winning film adaptation.

His mother, also a physician, was considered to be one of the world's leading experts on African birds and was known for treating wounded soldiers regardless of which side of a conflict they were on.

An upbringing in a dictatorship, which Carswell eventually left behind for schooling in Kenya and Southern England, set him on the path toward passionate belief in limited government.

"I think that, probably at a very early age without me even being aware of the fact, taught me that free markets are good and government regulation is bad. When I was a kid, the government nationalized the coffee crop, and literally I could see all the small old farms around me reverting back to being overgrown. Uganda in the 1970s and '80s was a classic example of how not to run a country," Carswell said.

Why Mississippi?

How a former member of Parliament ends up sitting at a desk in front of a Ronald Reagan poster in downtown Jackson is a question Carswell often gets.

"Now, you might at this point be thinking, why? Why do that?" Carswell said. "If you believe, as I believe, that liberty and freedom are the motor of human progress, they are the two things that have lifted our species, as Ronald Reagan whose poster adorns the wall behind me put it, that have lifted our species from the swamp to the stars, then there's no country like America. I am constantly amazed and delighted. Almost every day I find another reason to delight at being in America."

Carswell said it was important to him to ensure that the United States did not fall into some of the same mistakes that he believes the U.K. and the E.U. have.

"I thought to myself, if America loses the things that make her exceptional, then the world becomes a horrible, drab, dark place," Carswell said. "If America becomes a giant version of the European Union, then there's nowhere we can Brexit to."

While he had an offer to run a conservative thinktank in Washington, D.C., Carswell said a state position seemed more attractive.

"All of the great innovations in American public policy come from the states," Carswell said. "All of them. Charter schools came from the Midwest. Arizona's showing how to deregulate. Tennessee is showing how to cut taxes. Even if you believe in progressive environmental ideas, California showed how to do catalytic converters in cars. Whether you're left or right, the states are the engine of American innovation."

The South in particular was desirable, in part because of just how different it was from England.

"It's really different from England, but it's differences that actually I love, and I delight in," Carswell said. "Today I will see more sun in Mississippi than I would in London in a month. I love the climate here. It's not just the climate that's sunny. The people here are incredibly sunny. Mississippians have an incredibly sunny disposition, and it's impossible to go and buy groceries, or get gas at a gas station without someone coming up and talking to you. When I first came here. I thought that was unusual. Now I realize that that's the way life should be lived."

His family has settled in quickly, with his daughter taking up softball and regularly correcting her dad's English with the American versions of words and phrases.

Carswell believes his international path to the Magnolia State has granted him unique perspective to appreciate it.

"Great newspapers naturally look to see if there's fault in politicians and public policy in the country, and that's right and proper that that happens," Carswell said. "But I do sometimes think, actually, amid America's tendency towards self-criticism, America should sometimes just stop and appreciate what is remarkable about America. Take it from someone who's lived on three different continents in five or six different countries. There is no place I'd rather live than Mississippi, and there's no country where you get a better quality of life than the United States."

Political renegade or political maverick?

Matthew Goodwin, professor of politics and international relations at the University of Kent, said Carswell will likely be remembered as a "political renegade" who was critical to Brexit's electoral success.

Carswell disagrees with that characterization, though.

"I think he may mean maverick, rather than renegade," Carswell said. "A renegade is someone who deserts or abandons a set of principles. I stuck to mine."

Whether you see him as a renegade or a maverick, it is clear that Carswell has rarely fit neatly into any particular political box.

He shocked many of his Conservative Party colleagues in 2014 when he switched parties, becoming the first United Kingdom

Independence Party (UKIP) member of Parliament. But even in UKIP, Carswell stood out.

While united in opposition to E.U. membership, Carswell often clashed with UKIP's leader, Nigel Farage. Farage, who has a history of xenophobic statements, had a vision of the U.K. that stood in stark contrast to Carswell's more libertarian views. Farage largely wanted a U.K. with less immigration and more money spent on social programs for British citizens. Carswell was not opposed to high levels of immigration — as long as those levels were set by the U.K. government and not the E.U. — and wanted to see government spending reduced significantly.

"On the subject of immigration, let me make it absolutely clear; I'm not against immigration. The one thing more ugly than nativism is angry nativism," Carswell once wrote in a blog post.

Carswell even publicly called for Farage to step down as the party leader months before the Brexit referendum succeeded, calling for a "fresh face" to lead the party.

That said, by defecting to UKIP, Carswell granted legitimacy to Farage in eyes of many traditional conservative voters, Goodwin said.

"His defection from the Conservative Party to the U.K. Independence Party ahead of the Brexit referendum came at a critical moment in the history of British politics, fueling a sense that the incumbent government was imploding, and that Prime Minister David Cameron

was no longer really in control," Goodwin said. "Crucially, Carswell also lent legitimacy to Nigel Farage and the U.K. Independence Party, allowing it to reach further into disillusioned Conservative Party voters, which it did the following year when it polled an impressive 13% of the national vote."

In the months following the Brexit vote, as former New Statesman Political Editor Stephen Bush pointed out in 2017, Farage's views seemed to win out.

"There is no electoral majority to be found Britain for the libertarian brand of conservatism that Carswell espouses," Bush wrote. "In the referendum, while the margin of victory for Leave was so small that the liberal Leaver fringe can honestly claim to be decisive, in the main, people who voted to leave did so for higher public spending and lower immigration, a world away from the vision of Carswell."

Both men would step down soon after Brexit. In November 2016, after failing to be elected to Parliament himself, Farage stepped down as party leader, a move which Carswell seemed to celebrate on social media. Then, in 2017, Carswell would leave UKIP, becoming an independent and later choosing not to run for reelection.

"Like many of you, I switched to UKIP because I desperately wanted us to leave the EU. Now we can be certain that that is going to happen, I have decided that I will be leaving UKIP," Carswell said at the time.

Taking on the good old boys

Carswell's maverick nature has followed him across the Atlantic.

In Mississippi, he is not afraid to take on longstanding political systems, and the politicians of both parties who prop them up. Carswell said he believes that comparing other Southern states to Mississippi gives him all the ammunition he needs.

"We at the Mississippi Center for Public Policy realize that over the past 30 to 40 years, the Southern United States has done phenomenally well, seen enormous growth. In a sense, the Southern United States is not just the most populous region of the United States, it's now becoming the economic center of gravity," Carswell said, citing growth in Texas, Florida, Georgia and Tennessee. "But there's one state amidst all of that growth that has not done as well and that's Mississippi. How can we change that? Why is that?"

"I think in order to change that you need to recognize why it is. Mississippi has had a political system that's run as a cartel. You've got a good-old-boy system of boards and commissions, which require you to produce a permit to do pretty much anything."

Carswell may not be afraid to criticize actions taken by the state's Republican leaders, but he's also not afraid to seek common ground with Democrats.

"On Wednesday we had our (weekly) legislator lunch open to all legislators, and we had four Republicans and three Democrats," Carswell said. "And that's, that's pretty typical. We work with anyone interested in trying to raise Mississippi from being 50th out of 50."

While MCPP is not directly politically aligned, it is unapologetically conservative.

"I think the best way of describing it is Reaganite conservative. You know, we're optimistic, the antithesis of sort of angry conservatives," Carswell said.

Many of the state's Republican leaders are more than happy to appear beside Carswell at MCPP events. Attorney General Lynn Fitch was the featured speaker at the January leadership academy monthly meeting. In December it was State Auditor Shad White. Prior to being appointed auditor in 2018, White was director of MCPP's legal arm, the Mississippi Justice Institute.

"Douglas has been a force of nature since coming onto the scene in Mississippi. He's learned Mississippi policy quickly and has been an effective advocate," said White, who received a master's degree from Oxford. "As I learned in my time living in England, a British accent probably even helps a little in these policy debates."

Carswell's lack of American citizenship may be an asset when trying to work earnestly with the state's elected officials.

"I think as an organization, we're in a good position to kind of transcend party lines. You know, I'm the one guy in Mississippi who doesn't get a vote," Carswell said. "I'm not here positioning myself for a future primary."

Another way MCPP is taking on the good-old-boy system is through its leadership academy, Carswell said, which encourages young people to get politically involved as a way of preventing political stagnation, where longtime politicians are not challenged.

"When the Democrats ran things off good-old-boy factions, you know, decisions were made behind closed doors by little cliques of people, and was it the best way to run a state?" Carswell said. "I'm not sure that 100 years of one-party control of the state was necessarily a great way, and they got a lot of things wrong. And, however objectively you look back at that, if there had been a bit of choice and competition perhaps things would have been run a bit better."

Even once control of the state switched party hands, it remained difficult to change the status quo, Carswell said.

"Every time you try and challenge it in a state like Mississippi, you will get resistance," Carswell said. "Anytime you ever try and change things and create more of a free market, you're going to face powerful vested interests. But you can only see down those vested interests if

the rising generation of leaders recognizes that actually, you know, there is a profound moral case for change."

Carswell said there are important roles for government in his ideal vision, to do things like enforce public safety, provide clean drinking water and operate airports, but those are all things that government has done poorly in Mississippi.

"Government ought to be able to provide fresh running water," Carswell said. "Now, the Romans managed to master this about 2,000 years ago, the technology of putting water into pipes. The people who run Jackson seem to struggle with this."

Too often, Carswell says, government does a number of things it shouldn't while failing to do the few things it should. Fixing that, he believes, cannot be achieved through more federal funding. The only solution he sees is trusting in the free market.

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