

## Obituary: Denis Robertson Sullivan, Teacher and Political Activist

9TH JANUARY EDUCATION POLITICS SCOTLAND

By Zillah Byng-Thorne

Share    

0 comments



Denis Robertson Sullivan (1945–2026) (Image: Family)



Electricians Agree: Solar is only worthwhile if your roof...

### Obituary: Denis Robertson Sullivan (1945–2026)

Denis R Sullivan, Teacher, Political Activist and Public Affairs specialist.

Denis Robertson Sullivan, a towering figure in Scottish public life, passed away peacefully on 3rd January 2026 at his home in Kelvininside, Glasgow. He was 80 years old. He is survived by his beloved wife Anne Dunbar, his children Zillah, David, Zack, and Pamela, and his stepson Ali. His life was defined by service, principle, and an unwavering commitment to fairness.

Born on 1 March 1945, he grew up in post-war Scotland, a time of social change and expanding opportunity. His passion for art and design led him to The Glasgow School of [Art](#), where he studied sculpture from 1964 to 1968. Those years shaped his creativity and sharpened his skills in communication and critical thinking, qualities that would underpin his future roles as a union leader, political strategist, advocate and lover of the arts.

After graduating, he began teaching before joining the Educational Institute of Scotland (EIS) in 1971 as Assistant Secretary. For 18 years, he was at the heart of Scotland's teaching union during a period of intense industrial action and reform. He played a key role in campaigns for fair pay and conditions, including the landmark strikes of the 1980s. Colleagues recall his confident authority and strategic mind, which helped steer the union through turbulent times and secure lasting improvements for teachers.

A lifelong politician, in the early 1980s, he helped "break the mould" of British [politics](#) as a founding member of the Social Democratic Party (SDP). He was instrumental in forging the SDP–Liberal Alliance and famously backed Roy Jenkins in the historic Hillhead by-election of 1982. He twice stood as an Alliance candidate for [East Kilbride](#), finishing a strong second in 1983 and 1987.



Sullivan (right) famously backed Roy Jenkins in the historic Hillhead by-election of 1982 (Image: Family)

When the SDP merged with the Liberals to form the Liberal Democrats in 1988, he became a senior figure in the new party. As Scottish Treasurer and strategist, he helped shape the negotiations that led to the first Labour–Lib Dem coalition government in the Scottish Parliament in 1999. His insistence on securing meaningful concessions, such as progress on tuition fees and electoral reform, reflected his lifelong belief in fairness and accountability. Alongside politics, he built a successful career in public relations, co-founding PS Communications. His expertise in communications and governance made him a trusted adviser to businesses and charities alike.

In the mid-2000s, he turned his focus to housing and homelessness, becoming Chair of Shelter Scotland and Vice-Chair of Shelter UK. Under his leadership, Shelter championed Scotland's groundbreaking 2012 commitment to end homelessness, a pledge that positioned Scotland as a global leader in housing rights. His passion for social justice shone through in his tireless advocacy for vulnerable families and individuals.

A lifelong advocate of devolution, he played a central role in Scotland's journey to self-government. In later years, he concluded that independence was the logical next step and publicly supported the Yes campaign in the 2014 referendum. His stance reflected a consistent principle: that Scotland should have the powers it needs to shape its own future. He was part of the team that wrote the Scottish constitution.

His professional achievements were matched by a rich personal life. He married three times: first to Ellen McKenzie in the late 1960s while at Art School, with whom he had three children; then to Evelyn Robertson in 1990, with whom he shared one son; and finally to Anne Dunbar in 2009, who brought him great happiness in his later years. He was a loving father and 'Scottish Pops', ambitious for his children, proud of their accomplishments and always around for some wise counsel. He cherished family gatherings, lively conversation, and the arts—a passion rooted in his Glasgow School of Art days.

Away from public life, He enjoyed football, opera, the arts and latterly found his calling in writing. Friends remember his large personality, quick wit, warmth, and generosity of spirit. He was a mentor to many, offering wisdom drawn from decades of experience in public service. Denis Robertson Sullivan's life was defined by integrity, intellect, and empathy. From the classrooms of Scotland to the corridors of **Holyrood**, from union halls to charity boardrooms, he worked tirelessly to make society fairer and more humane. His legacy endures in the institutions he strengthened, the policies he shaped, and the countless lives improved by his efforts.

He will be deeply missed by his family, friends, and all who had the privilege to know him. Scotland has lost a true servant of the public good, a man who believed that progress is possible when people work together with courage and compassion.

Date of birth: 1st March 1945, date of death 3rd January 2026

*Funeral Service: Craigton Crematorium, Saturday 17 January 2026. Family flowers only; donations in his memory may be made to Adoption UK or Cancer research*