



BRENDAN O'HARA MP ARGYLL AND BUTE

AUTUMN 2021 NEWSLETTER

It has been a busy last few months both around the constituency and in Parliament. Particularly as restrictions ease, it has been great to reconnect with constituents and local organisations across Argyll and Bute. In Westminster I have continued to tackle issues that will impact people across Scotland - from the consequences of Brexit to the Universal Credit cut. You can find details of both my work in the constituency and in Westminster in this newsletter, alongside information on how to get in touch.



*What's in this
newsletter:*

**IN THE
CONSTITUENCY**

PARLIAMENT

**ALL PARTY
PARLIAMENTARY
GROUPS**

GET IN TOUCH

In the Constituency

A83 Rest and Be Thankful

The situation at The Rest continues to cause delays and difficulties for motorists particularly those involved in the haulage industry whose livelihood depends on being able to journey in and out of Argyll & Bute every day. I was pleased that one of the first things the new Scottish Government Transport Minister did was to go to the Rest and spend time seeing and hearing about the issues for himself. Since then, I have met with him to discuss the options, particularly the long-term option.

In this meeting and through letters to him since, I have emphasised the urgent need for action on a temporary alternative route through Glen Croe so we can ensure traffic keeps moving, as well as changes being made to the Old Military Road to help lorries make that journey more easily when they have to. I am grateful to the RABT campaign group for all their hard work and to Argyll Timber Transport Group for sharing their expertise with me.

I have been clear all along that we need the best sustainable, long term solution and as part of that I have been working with the Glasgow-based civil engineering firm COWI UK to look at the options for a tunnel at the Rest and also in rural and island areas across Scotland. The group that has been formed, BBRIL (Building Better Rural & Island Communities) aims to make the case for a network of fixed links – tunnels and bridges – across Argyll and the Highlands & Islands which would stop rural depopulation by giving people the chance to live in these places while at the same time, having the benefit of sustainable, all-weather connections to the mainland and urban centres.



We must find the best, long term fix to the problems at the Rest & Be Thankful as soon as possible.

Support for WASPI Women



It is vital that the WASPI women receive justice for the unfair changes to the state pension age.

It was great to meet up with just some of the thousands of 'WASPI' women across Argyll & Bute who have been affected by unfair changes to their state pension age. A recent, damning report by the Parliamentary & Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) found the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) failed to take adequate account of the need for targeted and individually tailored communication on State Pension age changes for women born in the 1950s and, once it was aware of these mistakes, then continued to take the same action despite knowing it wasn't working. The Ombudsman said the DWP's failures amounted to "maladministration".

My SNP colleagues and I have worked towards securing fairness for the women impacted by the changes to the State Pension age and have continually advocated on their behalf in Westminster. The women – and men – involved in the WASPI campaign, including the Argyll & Isles group, have worked so hard to keep this issue in the spotlight and have this inequality rectified and rightly so.

My SNP colleagues and I will continue to support their campaign as we wait for the next stage of the Ombudsman report to be published and hope that, finally, these women will get what is owed to them.

Broadband

Ensuring access to quality, reliable and affordable broadband across Argyll & Bute remains one of the biggest challenges we face and I continue to press the UK Government to invest in the Emergency Services Network so that mast sharing can be enabled. This infrastructure is in place at several locations across the constituency, we just need the Home Office to give it the green light. Although broadband is reserved to Westminster, I am also in regular communication with the Scottish Government, Openreach and BT regarding the roll-out of the R100 programme and trying to make sure no-one is disadvantaged because of where they live.



Keeping Communities safe and ensuring engagement

I share the concerns of firefighters, MoD guards and other contractors working at Faslane and Coulport naval bases currently taking industrial action job cuts and pay and have raised this with the Ministry of Defence on several occasions. Those who work to ensure that communities are kept safe whether that's in running highly complex systems at the base or ensuring the most highly skilled and responsive fire and rescue capacity is maintained in the event of a nuclear or other incident, it is vital that the role these people play is valued and properly rewarded. It is concerning that the MoD would rather out-source valuable services to private contractors, so they can make a profit, than ensure those who work in these important roles are properly recognised and the communities which these bases are located, are kept as safe as possible.

I have also written to the MoD to ask why it is becoming harder for local people and community groups in the Helensburgh and Garelochhead area to access facilities like the ski slope and swimming pool at Faslane naval base. Many local people, including my own children, benefitted from being able to use these facilities but now it seems access is being denied. I completely understand why the base became out of bounds during lockdown but with so many other facilities like council-owned swimming pools and sports centres re-opening I cannot understand why local people would be turned away. It is so important that there is a good relationship between the MoD and the local community.

Affordable Housing

As well as the challenges Brexit has brought to our health and social care sector, hospitality and agriculture sectors with a shortage of workers, Argyll & Bute has a serious shortage of available and affordable housing for people already living here and those who may wish to take up job or education opportunities here. This is an issue I have raised with the Scottish Government and Argyll & Bute Council and I am glad the Council has committed to building 1000 more affordable homes across the constituency over the next five years, with 373 new homes in 2021/2022 alone. Examples of good quality affordable housing to rent and buy can be seen across the area and as we have seen in areas like Ulva Ferry on Mull, these homes can also bring massive environmental benefits. Although housing is the responsibility of the local authority, it is one of the issues that most constituents get in touch with me about, especially overcrowding.

During the pandemic we have also seen more than ever before, how important our homes are to us and, as the Scottish Government has done, we must continue to be ambitious and set targets that will make a real difference to people and our communities.

I also recently took part in a summit organised by the Scottish Association for Marine Science (SAMS) where the lack of housing in the area and the abundance of holiday homes and holiday lets is having a critical impact on both students and staff.

Doing all we can to reverse rural de-population is hugely important and I am fully supportive of efforts to build more affordable homes for those who wish to live, work and contribute to communities across Argyll & Bute. We must also see investment in connectivity including our road and ferry networks as well as broadband.



Brendan O'Hara MP with Wendy Reid, Liz Peel and Alistair Scarlett, Senior Site Manager, TSL Ltd. Others are of an old steading building, an ongoing renovation and the street signs.

Visits across the constituency

The isles of Mull, Iona and Ulva

Over the summer weeks I was able to meet up with so many people (within public health guidance). One of my first visits was to Mull, Iona and Ulva.

On Ulva I met up with Community Development manager Wendy Reid and Liz Peel, who along with others, have been working with TSL Ltd, to turn many of the island's old stone cottages and other buildings into new homes. This is the first major development on the island since the community buy-out and an excellent example of what can be achieved when communities are empowered.

It was also good to meet with Shiona Ruhemann, convenor of Iona Community Council and representative for Iona Renewables who gave me an update on their plans to acquire funding for and implement a low carbon renewable heat alternative throughout the island, in line with the Scottish Government's commitments to invest £1.6 billion in transforming the heat and energy efficiency of our homes and buildings.

During my visit to Fionnphort, I met up with Sandy Brunton of Mull and Iona Community Trust (MICT) and Cameron Anson of South West Mull & Iona Development (SWMID).



Ulva Development Trust are renovating older cottages to provide additional housing.

I heard more about the work they've been doing to improve the lives of island residents including the renovation of old buildings to create more affordable housing including at Pennygael, as well as working with the Ulva Ferry Local Development team on new affordable homes at Ulva Ferry. I also visited Fionnphort post office where I have been assisting with some ATM issues. I also held parliamentary advice surgeries in Iona, Salen and Tobermory.



The Ulva Development Trust are working to build more affordable housing in the constituency's rural areas.

Kerrera

It was good to catch up on the work Kerrera Development Trust has been doing to make improvements for residents and visitors to the island. Martin and Aideen Shields, the project manager, showed me the new road linking north of island to the south, which is almost finished, while the Trust's other big project, converting the former school into a community centre, thanks to funding from the Scottish Land Fund, has been a great success. This is an island on the up, with great facilities and a regular ferry service. Following my return from Kerrera I raised the issue of the lack of parking for visitors to the island. It is great so many people want to hop over for the day, but we need proper parking facilities as well, not on grass verges.



Brendan is pictured with Martin and Aideen Shields who run a tea garden for visitors.



Brendan is pictured with Martin at the site of the islands' new road.



Brendan with volunteers Mandy and John Peden, stripping down a flower display before work begins on the old huts at the Rockfield Centre

Oban and Lorn

I held a surgery at the Rockfield Centre and was delighted to be visited by constituents and representatives of various businesses and organisations including biotechnology company Oceanium who are helping turn the tide on climate change and ensure we all benefit from the positive impact of using sustainably-sourced seaweed in food and food products. I also met up with volunteers at the Rockfield Centre who are working hard on making improvements, as well as Oban's BID manager Andy Spence.

It was also good to spend time visiting Bonawe where I caught up with developments at the Ardchattan Centre. I met with volunteers and directors including chair Breege Smyth, who were all involved in the community buy-out of the former school building and are now in the process of renovating it. It's great to see folk come together to save and repurpose such an important local asset.



Brendan with Graham MacQueen, of the MacQueen Brothers Charitable Trust, and Gordon MacNab from the Oban Community Trust, chat to Brendan about developments for the Rockfield Centre.



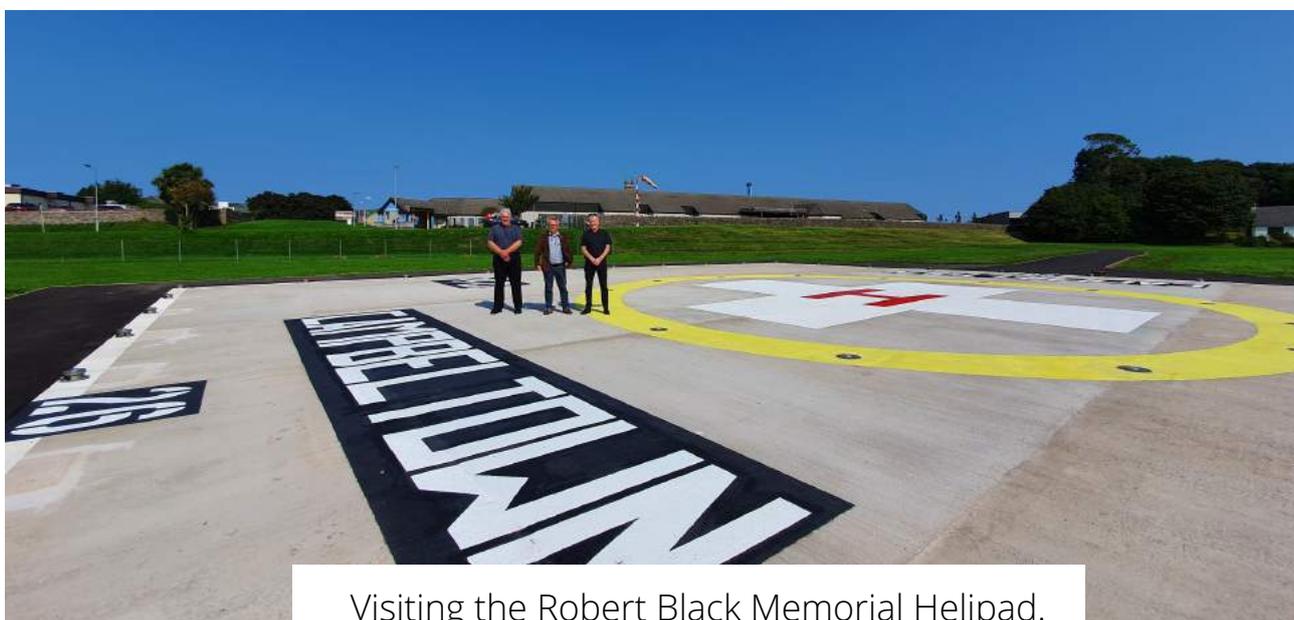
Meeting volunteers at the Archattan Centre.

Kintyre

My visit to Kintyre was a busy one with stops to catch up with various businesses in Tarbert including the brilliant Zing Organics. I also met up with Jamie McMillan, owner of Loch Fyne Langoustine and Lochfyne Seafarms to hear more about the costly impact Brexit has had on his business, so much so that he is no longer exporting to Europe at all. As the seafood industry's biggest and closest market, Brexit has wreaked devastation on this important industry. Scottish seafood is world-famous and the jobs it creates across Argyll & Bute are vital to so many small communities. The UK Government must hang its head in shame at the situation it has inflicted on this area and across Scotland. I held a surgery in Campbeltown and met up with the owners of several local businesses and organisations including the Kintyre Larder and Campbeltown foodbank. I am also very grateful to Eric Spence of South Kintyre Community Trust and Councillor John Armour for taking the time to show me the new Robert Black Memorial Helipad. This is an enormous asset to the area, and I am glad to see that giving the emergency helicopter a proper and safe place to land has helped so many local people in need, already. Well done to all involved!



Brendan is pictured with councillor John Armour and Eric Spence of South Kintyre Community Trust, at Robert Black Memorial Helipad.



Visiting the Robert Black Memorial Helipad.

In Gigha I met with Joe Teale, owner of the local shop, to discuss issues with unaccompanied loose freight getting to the island while in Tayinloan I discussed broadband issues with the new owners of the pub and shop who are working flat out to renovate the facilities so they can be enjoyed by residents and visitors to the area.

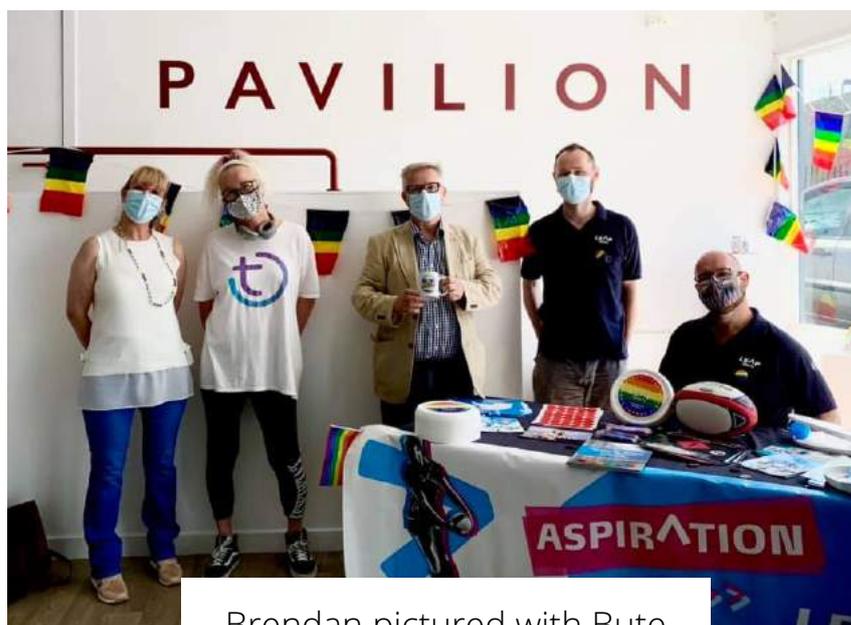


Brendan on the ferry to Gigha.

Isle of Bute

It was good to visit Bute in early July and take part in the PRIDE Bute relaunch out of lockdown drop-in event at The Bank of Ideas in Rothesay. The event was designed to offer help and advice to those who may be struggling with their sexuality and feel isolated, particularly due to the pandemic. During the event experts from Waverley Care provided information on sexual health while representatives from Equality Network Scotland & LEAP Sports Scotland were able to discuss diversity, equality, rights and political issues as well as provide information on inclusive activities and sports.

It was good to catch up with so many people including Alan Izat from Bute LGBT+ Community Group and Pride organisation, as well as Oceana Maund from Equality Network and Tommy and Bill from Leap Sports. Fundraising on the day was used to support the third annual Bute PRIDE event which took place in September.



Brendan pictured with Bute Pride event organisers.



Brendan is happy to support Bute Pride and their work in the local community.

Mid Argyll

I was very concerned that a number of constituents in Ardrishaig and the Lochgilphead area had experienced issues when they required emergency support from the Scottish Ambulance Service, including one local man having a heart attack. I know members of our highly valued emergency services work very hard and that the pandemic has brought unprecedented challenges, so it was concerning to hear that due to high demand on the service, some people were faced with an agonising wait or face the prospect of taking their loved ones to hospital themselves. I raised this with the Scottish Ambulance Service and was pleased they conducted full reviews into these incidents. It is good to know this issue has been recognised and the SAS is part way through the recruitment and training of an additional 296 frontline staff by March 2022, which will provide additional capacity to meet challenging peaks in demand, to reduce delays for patients and the likelihood of an incident like this occurring in the future.

These were very frightening experiences for those involved and their loved ones and it is vital that people who live in rural areas are not disadvantaged because of where they live.

More recently, I attended the opening of the new Argyll & Bute Citizens Advice Bureau (ABCAB) hub in Argyll Street, Lochgilphead. The work being done by ABCAB is vital especially now the government at Westminster is cutting the £20 a week Universal Credit uplift and the furlough is coming to an end. This, combined with rising energy prices and increasing food and fuel poverty, means more people will need the help, support and expertise offered by CAB than ever before. My constituency office will work closely with ABCAB to support those in need through this crisis and with all employment and benefits matters. I cannot thank the ABCAB team enough for the work they have been doing to help so many people across the constituency during the pandemic and I know that in the tough times ahead, they will continue to provide a life-line service to many.



Brendan is pictured with Bureau Manager, Jen Broadhurst and ABCAB Chairperson Iain Ritchie.

Parliament



Supporting the 'Reject the Crunch' Campaign.

Universal Credit

One of the worst and most contentious issues that I have had to deal with this year as an MP has been the proposed cuts to Universal Credit. I have had hundreds of constituents contact me to voice their opposition to these cuts and I have been involved in efforts by the SNP and cross-party to stop these cuts from going ahead. £20 a week – or £80 a month – is the difference in being able to eat, heat your home or pay the bills for so many people. Statistics from the House of Commons library show that over 6,000 people across Argyll & Bute will be affected. This is in addition to people losing their jobs

during the pandemic, businesses being hit by Brexit, a rise in National Insurance contributions and the end of the furlough later this month. There cuts are cruel and unnecessary and will affect so many individuals and families. I have backed the SNP 'Reject the Crunch' campaign which calls for the Chancellor to rethink these cuts, which he seeks to impose at the worst possible time. Massive rises in energy costs from this month will also hit the least well-off most and means many more people will be forced to make the decision between heating and eating.

Brexit

As we focus on recovering from the health, social and economic impact of the pandemic, we are now seeing the true impact of Brexit and a government which is so intent on pursuing some outdated ideal of 'Great Britain' that it is willing to sacrifice jobs and trade with our nearest neighbour and the world's biggest trading bloc to do it. Across Argyll & Bute we have seen health providers and hospitality venues having to close or only open part-time because they can't get the staff, we have seen some of our world-renowned food and drink producers suffer because of increased customs procedures, costs and barriers put in their way to trading in Europe, with some of them like Lochfyne Seafarms finding it too difficult and costly to send their world-class produce to European markets. More recently we have seen a massive spike in gas prices and panic buying at the fuel pumps due to HGV driver shortages. None of this is happening in Europe.



Meeting with Jamie McMillan, of Lochfyne Seafarms, to discuss the consequences of Brexit

It is all a consequence of leaving the EU and in particular, the loss of freedom of movement. Only by becoming Independent, can Scotland rejoin the EU and regain access to all of the benefits of membership.

Foreign Aid Cuts

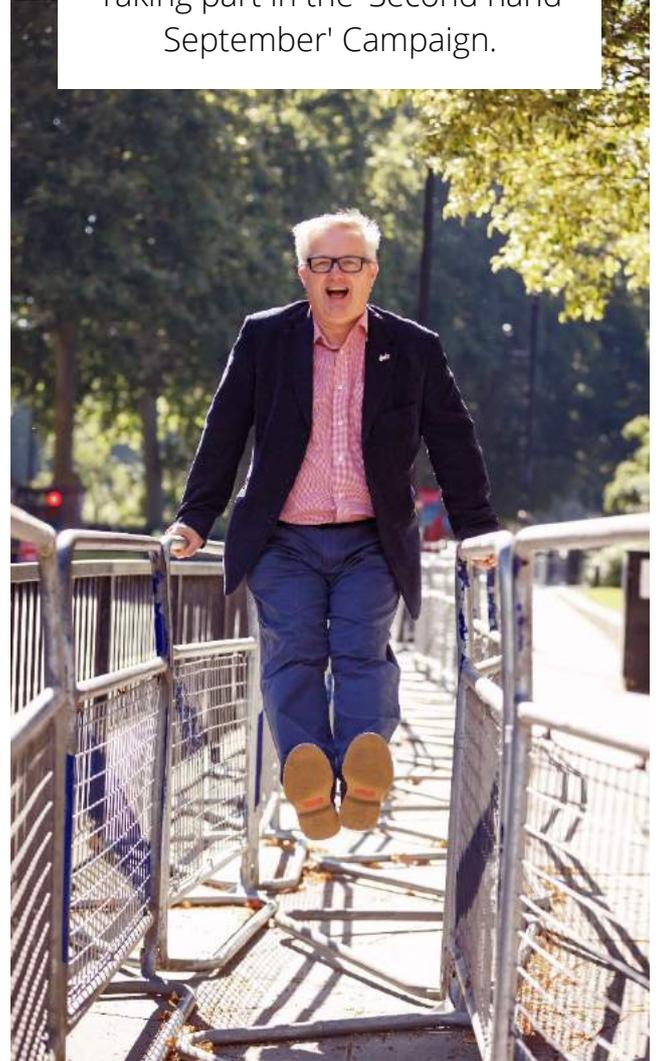
I am grateful to all constituents across Argyll & Bute who contacted me to voice their opposition to the UK Government slashing the foreign aid budget by £5 billion. Like so many of those who have been in touch, I find it utterly incomprehensible that the government of one of the richest countries in the world, has actively moved to make the poorest people on this planet even poorer and more susceptible and vulnerable to disease, hunger and a lack of clean water. This morally repugnant move will prevent NGOs and charities like our own Mary's Meals providing vital, life-saving work. It also impacts on research funding given to our universities to carry out vital work overseas including some into global food safety.

The UK has a moral obligation to help those in what we now call the developing world, not least because this country is in no small way responsible for the situation in which they now find themselves. As I said in my speech, the UK — Great Britain — grew rich and powerful on the backs of the world's poor. We invaded, conquered, divided and plundered, leaving behind an impoverished wasteland. It is about time that this country woke up to its moral responsibility to assist those we abandoned to live with the consequences of British imperialism. We should not be running away from that responsibility.

COP 26

As a lead member of the SNP COP26 team I have been involved in making sure the climate crisis is top of the agenda at Westminster. As someone who believes passionately in doing all we can to reduce emissions and to help those worst affected by the climate change, I have been holding the UK Government to account so that this year's COP, in Glasgow, is a real success. In mid-September I secured a Back Bench Business Debate on 'The Role of the Devolved Administrations' and spoke about the ambitious actions taken by the Scottish Government to achieve net zero and the need for urgent action to be taken following the UN's 'code red' report. I have also taken part in talks with the UK COP President Alok Sharma and met with many organisations representing environmental action groups including Stop Climate Chaos Scotland (SCCS) for SNP MPs and MSPs. Locally, I am supportive of the efforts of the Time is Now Argyll & Bute group, taking part in their recent climate summit, and fully back the efforts of off-shore wind and tidal developments as well as the massive investment in producing and storing energy at Ben Cruachan.

Taking part in the 'Second hand September' Campaign.



We must all heed the stark warnings of the UN 'code red' report and cut global emissions to keep global temperature rise to 1.5 degrees, and to give the world a fighting chance in the war against climate change.

Afghanistan

The situation in Afghanistan is also another humanitarian crisis resulting from failed foreign policy objectives by the UK and the botched UK/US departure from the country after 20 years. In the days and weeks after the Taliban seized control of Kabul, hundreds of constituents contacted me pleading for something to be done to help so many people who had worked with the UK governments and other organisations over the last 20 years, and their families, now in fear for their lives. These people face truly horrific consequences, and we all know that the abandonment by the West has left these people utterly vulnerable. I contacted the Foreign Development and Commonwealth Office on behalf of several constituents with specific knowledge of people eligible for the ARAP or Afghan Resettlement Scheme, still in the country, some in hiding in fear of Taliban reprisals.



Intervening in the Afghanistan debate.

I also contacted the FCDO on behalf of the Scottish Humanitarian organisation, Spirit Aid, sending them a list of their doctor, teachers, pharmacists and guards, who have all helped the organisation's vital work in rural Afghanistan since 2002. However, it appeared my emails, like those from other MPs offices, went into a 'black hole'. It was weeks later, following pressure from MPs across the House, that these emails were even looked at. Even now, all I know is that the Home Office has the list of Spirit Aid workers and others I contacted them about, but not if anything has been done to help them. This is a situation entirely of the UK's own making and we have a moral responsibility to help.



The Elections Bill is a danger to democracy.

Dark days for democracy

Over the last few months, I have been involved in many debates over a raft of unnecessary and regressive legislation the Tories are trying to get through Parliament which are an attack on our democracy. From the Elections Bill, which threatens to disenfranchise swathes of people, particularly the poor, young, disabled, vulnerable and minority communities, to the Policing Bill plans to ban peaceful protest and unauthorised encampments and the Nationality and Borders Bill which would see refugees desperate to flee to the UK turned back by Border Force in the English Channel, to attacks on media freedom including plans to sell Channel 4 simply because it doesn't like the challenge it presents to government, we are seeing massive erosion of our fundamental rights and freedoms. As I said in my most recent speech on the Elections Bill Committee,

"They know full well that already in the United Kingdom there are between 2.5 and 3.5 million people who do not have access to photo ID and that they will almost certainly join the nine million UK citizens who are already missing from the Electoral Register...given it is estimated that this charade will cost in excess of £120 million to administer, I can't help but wonder if that money wouldn't be much better spent supporting families out of poverty – by not cutting the uplift to Universal Credit." These are dark days for democracy as we see a Conservative party doing more to appease the right wing UKIP faction, that keeps it in power, than doing anything that would improve the lives of millions of people across the UK. It is clear the aim is to silence people, side-line parliament and strengthen the powers of the executive so they can continue to undermine democracy. These extreme actions, along with the cuts to Foreign Aid, are a danger to us all.

All Party Parliamentary Groups

As SNP spokesperson on International Human Rights & Conflict Resolution, I am involved in a number of All Party Parliamentary Groups which work to raise awareness of human rights abuses and the need for the UK government to hold others to account.

APPG Human Rights and Democracy in the Gulf

As chairperson of the cross-party APPG on Human Rights and Democracy in the Gulf, I work closely with the Bahrain Institute for Rights & Democracy, Human Rights Watch and Amnesty UK to hold the Bahraini authorities to account on their appalling human rights record including torture, execution, the use of death penalty and the forced detention of political prisoners against International agreements, as well as the government's refusal to allow independent human rights monitoring. The UK government has a close relationship with Bahrain and should be doing more to ensure that human rights are upheld. During the pandemic we have also advocated for political prisoners threatened by Covid in prisons.



On a previous visit to Greenland in 2018.

APPG Greenland

As chair of the APPG for Greenland, I have focused on fostering relationships between the UK and Greenlandic Parliaments. The meetings have hosted Greenlandic Ministers, representatives from the fishing industry, and businesses from across Greenland, to discuss issues such as climate change, post-Brexit trade agreements and economic development in Greenland. In my role as Chair of the APPG I also have the privilege of being invited to the 'Arctic Circle 2021' conference in Reykjavik, Iceland.

I am also involved in several other APPGs concerned with human rights including the APPG for International Freedom of Religion or Belief, APPG Eritrea, APPG Christianity in the Holy Land and the new APPG for Female Judges and Lawyers in Afghanistan. I am also planning to re-launch the APPG for the Yazidi's calling for the UK government to launch an investigation to find over 2600 women and child victims of Daesh who have been missing in Iraq since 2014.

In addition to the specific APPGs I also work with organisations including Open Doors, Prisoners of Conscience, Amnesty UK and the Coalition for Genocide Response on Human Rights abuses across the globe including the kidnapping of girls in India and Nigeria.

Early Day Motions

Submitting an Early Day Motion is a good way for an MP to make sure the good work of individual constituents or local organisations is recognised, as well as to support other MPs in recognising or drawing attention to events.

Over the last few months, I have put down a number of motions to mark good work including applauding Springbank Distillery on its efforts to reduce its carbon footprint, marking the enormous achievement of Mary's Meals in feeding 2 million people a day, recognising Hermitage Academy pupil Iona Davies winning first prize in the S1-S3 category in the Show Racism the Red Card creative arts competition, and congratulating Dunoon resident John Frace on being awarded outstanding contribution from a university student in the Herald Higher Education Awards 2021 for his work in establishing the Scottish and UK covid-19 tracking website.

A full list of the EDMS I have submitted is available here <https://edm.parliament.uk/>



Outside 'Mary's Meals' which has set up feeding programmes in some of the world's poorest country's

Parliamentary receptions and other events

Parliamentary receptions are a good way for charities and other organisations to raise awareness of their work with MPs and I was delighted to be able to take part in the first reception in Parliament since lockdown, to support the work of Macmillan cancer support. Every family who has been helped by Macmillan knows how important they are, and their annual 'World's Biggest Coffee Morning' is a great way to support them.

I have also taken part in a couple of virtual parliamentary receptions over the last few months as well as taken part on online meetings as a trustee of the Westminster Foundation for Democracy. This is a great cross-party organisation working to strengthen democracy around the world.



Supporting Macmillan at their Parliamentary event

Get in Touch

If the pandemic has brought any benefits at all it has been in online communication and meeting up with people via platforms like Zoom and MS Teams has helped so much.

Even when I had to call off a trip to Islay due to being called for a PCR test (negative thankfully!) and trips to Colonsay due to Parliament being recalled and Tiree & Coll due to the weather, I have been able to catch up with some of those I had hoped to visit. I have also been able to run parliamentary advice surgeries online and I think this has made arranging appointments for constituents easier and quicker.

If you would like to get in touch, please email me at

brendan.ohara.mp@parliament.uk

You can also keep up to date with my work and how I have voted by signing up to **www.theyworkforyou.com**, and visiting my website

<https://brendanoharamp.scot/> and my facebook page

<https://www.facebook.com/BrendanOHaraSNP>.

You can also call the constituency office on 01436 670587.

