RURAL ECONOMY AND CONNECTIVITY

ISLANDS (SCOTLAND) BILL

SUBMISSION FROM ARTHUR CORMACK

1. The Bill says that the Scottish Government should publish a national islands plan and then the Scottish Parliament should look at the plan. Do you agree with this?
   Yes

What are your views on having a national islands plan?

A National Islands Plan would be a good idea if it dealt with overcoming some of the issues experienced by islanders, including the Isle of Skye where I am resident which is very much an island! Just because we are connected to the mainland by a bridge does not mean we are immune to problems with land ownership, centralisation of services and finance by our local authority, health provision, transport, tourism (also a huge benefit, of course), support for the Gaelic language and migration of young people. If those are the kinds of issues that would be dealt with in a National Islands Plan, I would be supportive of that.

2. The Bill will require Scottish Ministers and certain Scottish public authorities to prepare islands impact assessments. Do you agree with this provision?
   Yes

What are your views on this provision?

There are certain elements of island life which residents would like to observe and preserve. Often, national initiatives can either not take account of those elements, or sometimes work against them. Assessing the impact of legislation and initiatives on island life would be a welcome move. I have a particular interest in Gaelic and I believe assessments should extend to impacts on the language from national/regional initiatives.

3. The Bill suggests that the Scottish Parliamentary constituency boundary of Na h-Eileanan an Iar (the Western Isles) should be protected from any future changes. Do you agree with this?
   Yes

4. Each local government electoral ward usually elects 3 or 4 members. The Bill suggests that island areas may need fewer members (1 or 2). Do you agree?
   No
What are your views on this proposal?

Within the current local authority setup it may be the case that there are too many councillors representing some islands, if size of population and numbers represented are the measures for setting the number of members. However, transport availability and remoteness must also be factored in. Skye has 4 members for a large island who constitute just 5% of Highland councillors making it very difficult to participate in the democratic process and, because they are frequently outnumbered, to get things agreed and done in Skye. I do not think that cutting representation would be a good thing for democracy.

5. The Bill will say that Scottish Ministers should be able to create a marine licensing scheme for coastal waters. Do you agree?

Yes

6. Are you in favour of the Bill overall?

Yes

Is there anything else that you feel should be included or excluded from the Bill?

At the time of the 2011 census 21% of Gaelic speakers lived in communities where the level of speakers was above the national average. Communities with the highest percentages of Gaelic speakers were to be found in the Western Isles, Skye and Argyll’s Islands. All of the communities where a majority of people spoke Gaelic were in the Western Isles. The Islands Bill could have an impact on many of the communities with levels of Gaelic speakers over 20%. These communities are considered key to the progress and future wellbeing of Gaelic in Scotland as they provide opportunities for Gaelic to be used in daily life and an environment where young people are more likely to emerge as Gaelic speakers. The Bill could also have a positive impact on economic issues and outward migration. Many Gaelic speakers still have to leave islands for further education and/or work and some never return. This has a huge impact on communities in general and on the use and profile of the Gaelic language also. Some language planners believe that retaining people in island communities through education, work and family life would have a significant positive impact on the health of Gaelic. The Bill should undertake to consider the needs of Gaelic, possibly as defined in the National Gaelic Language Plan and the Gaelic Plans of relevant local authorities, when carrying out the assessment of impacts on islands from various initiatives and pieces of legislation.

7. Do you have any comments on the bill in relation to human rights or equalities?

Gaelic has the potential to be considered an issue of both equality (parity of treatment and equal respect with English should be afforded to Gaelic in islands communities where it is spoken) and human rights. A Gaelic speaker should have the right to use his/her language of choice in an island community without fear of
denigration. Gaelic education should be available to any parent who wishes it for his/her child (this goes further than the rights granted under the Education [Scotland] Act 2016) in an island where 20% or more people speak the language. The language should be visible, supported and services from local authorities and public bodies should be available to residents in Gaelic should they wish to access them.

Arthur Cormack
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