

# Speaking to Owen Thompson MP

**Speaking to Owen Thompson MP over Zoom for this interview, it was clear that one of the reasons he enjoyed working from home was spending much more time with his young daughter.**

He explained that a good part of his week would be spent on Zoom calls and Teams meetings from home. That is a definite bonus, and also he explained that just being in the constituency more is a win-win. But there have still been occasions for him to travel to London.

This is somewhat frustrating to the Midlothian MP who thinks there would be real benefits – not least of which would be real financial savings – in having an electronic voting system in parliament.

In the main he has avoided public transport of any kind and has chosen to drive to Westminster to try and stay as safe as possible. He explained that this allows him to minimise any stops and allows him to stay in his own 'bubble' in his car. When at Westminster it is now mandatory to wear masks even in the Chamber, but a lot of the time Thompson keeps as safe in his own office.

It has been necessary to be in parliament since the government stopped their initial move towards electronic voting.

Thompson explained: "For most of the period of lockdown I have still had to travel to London. Briefly in March the parliament introduced electronic voting. and allowed all the business to be done that way. This meant for a short period we could do everything remotely.

"At that time it was one of the first parliaments the world to do that. I am on the Procedures committee – which is as exciting as it sounds although it has had an important role to play in getting all the new procedures in place. Because of the speed at which the parliament reacted a number of parliaments around the world came to us to ask how it worked. At the time we were conducting a session with the Japanese parliament and they were really interested in how the electronic voting was working. I took the chance to explain that although it had worked and had not failed at any point unfortunately the government have stopped it.

"On 30 December for the Brexit deal, three or four of us had to be there physically. Recently, three or four of us had to be there to push a vote on the Financial Services Bill. You can get a proxy vote and one person can be there to vote for everyone, but to cast one of our own votes we need to have two tellers there in addition. As the Deputy Chief Whip I am one of the few who have had to continue to travel which has brought its own challenges.

"But there is more ability to take part virtually now so that should reduce how often we need to do the travelling, but it is still an issue."

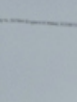
I asked whether he felt it is still necessary to be there as an SNP MP in a parliament where the government has a substantial majority. Owen explained that the key thing is that the SNP make sure the arguments are heard, even if they are not winning votes. He continued: "You know you can issue press releases all you want after the event, but being there and actually directly questioning the government is important.

And making them squirm – as they have on many occasions when you can see that we are asking the questions they don't want to be asked. So if we weren't there asking them then who would? For years our constituents have had representation at Westminster and we are still a part of that parliament for now. For me I want to be sure that my constituents are still represented, and show them the benefits of having an elected representative who will fight for them. And to show what the benefits could be if we were fighting for them in our own independent parliament. While we are a part of it we have to take a full part to show what the arguments and positions are.

“For many, it appears that their understanding of politics in Scotland is severely limited.”

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Thompson explained that one of the campaigns he is running is to help those excluded from any kind of help or assistance for whatever reason during the pandemic. This includes

freelancers, the self-employed and others. Recently he led a Westminster debate on the matter of small companies.

He continues to make the case to the Chancellor on behalf of these groups of people in businesses of all kinds. Thompson explained: "Right at the start the Chancellor said he would do whatever it took and the Prime Minister said they would put their arms around everybody but they have just not done it. They have failed spectacularly."

The community spirit is still massively strong in Midlothian and Owen is amazed at the effort, but at the same time not surprised by it. He said that the former mining areas which form at least part of his constituency used to have this community spirit. Now it is back with people looking out for each other as perhaps they used to.

But he concluded: "How quickly people reacted and came together was still quite incredible. But one of the big effects of the pandemic was that none of the gala days could take place last year which are always a great part of the summer in Midlothian. I know that the gala day committees are getting together to see what if anything they can do this year. But there is still a level of uncertainty of course. They would normally spend their year fundraising to put on the summer events and they can't do that right now."

Mr Thompson also refers during our podcast interview to the council meeting which was just about to take place on the future of Glencorse Primary School. That decision was then made by Midlothian Council to recommend to The Scottish Government that the small school would be closed down. As a former councillor, and an MP whose mailbag is still full of council-related problems, Thompson is all too aware of the issue of this particular primary school, but thinks that at this time it is the wrong decision to make.

He said: "I can't understand it. We're asking people to have

more space and Midlothian is the fastest growing population in Scotland. They tried to close the school three times when I was a councillor and three times they rejected it. It is frustrating, especially the timing of it.”

You can listen to our interview with Owen Thompson above.