

**Press release**

**For immediate release**

**Wednesday 9 March 2016**

### **Launch of All-Party Parliamentary Group on Eritrea**

#### **New group gives key outlet in UK Parliament for debate and inquiry into human rights abuses in Eritrea**

A cross-party group of Parliamentarians today formed the new APPG on Eritrea. Matthew Pennycook, MP for Greenwich and Woolwich, was elected Chair at an inaugural meeting and AGM. Four Parliamentarians were elected Vice Chairs, specifically Ann Clwyd MP, Patrick Grady MP, Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead, and Jeremy Lefroy MP. Lord Alton of Liverpool and Fiona Bruce, MP for Congleton, were also present.

An estimated 5,000 people leave Eritrea every month and almost as many men, women and children left that blighted country last year as fled from Syria. It is a human exodus that is all the more staggering when one considers that it is from a country of just 6 million people and one that is not presently at war. No elections since 1993, no independent press since a government clampdown in 2001, pervasive and ongoing restrictions of all freedoms, movement, expression and association, arbitrary arrest with no fair trials or no trials at all, indefinite compulsory military conscription, forced labour, and torture including widespread sexual violence against women and girls. That is Eritrea today.

It is a far cry from what so many Eritreans fought for, heroically, for decades, and from the hopes of those who supported the struggle for liberation. Instead of democracy and the rule of law, Eritreans are ruled by a culture of fear and absolute obedience.

The new APPG has been created to raise awareness of the human rights abuses which are taking place in Eritrea today, to examine and debate how the situation in the country could be improved and to raise matters of concern with, and make representations to, government and other policy makers.

Commenting on the establishment of the new APPG, Matthew Pennycook MP said:

“Eritrea is a central battleground in the global struggle for human rights. Our own national interest, as well as our credentials as a bastion of human rights, demand that we give the victims of the Afwerki regime not only our solidarity but also clear and unequivocal support to alleviate the very real suffering they face. The new APPG will provide a valuable forum for raising awareness about the human rights abuses taking place in Eritrea and for debate about how the situation in the country can be improved”.

The APPGs newly elected officers are:

- Chair: Matthew Pennycook MP (Labour, Greenwich and Woolwich)
- Vice Chair: Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead (Labour)
- Vice Chair: Jeremy Lefroy MP (Conservative, Stafford)
- Vice Chair: Ann Clwyd MP (Labour, Cynon Valley)
- Vice Chair: Patrick Grady MP (SNP, Glasgow North)

ENDS

### **Notes to editors**

Matthew Pennycook is a British Labour Party politician. He has been the Member of Parliament for Greenwich & Woolwich since May 2015. Before becoming an MP, Pennycook worked for a number of charitable and voluntary organisations including at the Fair Pay Network and the Resolution Foundation where he led on issues relating to welfare reform, low pay and working poverty.

Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead was appointed Co-chair. Baroness Kinnock is the shadow spokesperson for International development and former Minister of State for Africa and the UN in 2009. Other parliamentarians who took Vice Chair positions include well-respected human rights campaigners Ann Clywd MP, Labour MP for Cynon Valley, Patrick Grady MP, the SNP Westminster spokesperson for International Development, and Jeremy Lefroy MP, who has a long interest in the Horn of Africa and human rights.

The APG on Eritrea was formally formed at its AGM held on Wednesday, 9 March 2016. Parliamentarians present at the meeting were Matthew Pennycook MP (Labour, Greenwich and Woolwich), Baroness Kinnock of Holyhead (Labour), Patrick Grady MP (SNP, Glasgow North), Lord Alton of Liverpool (Crossbench), and Fiona Bruce (Conservative, Congleton).

Habte Hagos, a founding member of Eritrea Focus, said “this forum gives the long suffering Eritrean people a voice. It will expose the injustice being perpetrated by the Isaias regime on its own people. Eritrea today is ruled by fear with persistent intimidation by the regime and its cliques against peaceful opponents both at home and abroad.”

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