

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Eighth Delegated Legislation Committee

SPEAKER'S COMMITTEE FOR THE
INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS
AUTHORITY

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY
COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND

Tuesday 24 November 2015

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STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT WILL GREATLY
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IN GENERAL COMMITTEES

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: PHIL WILSON

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|---|---|
| † Allen, Mr Graham (<i>Nottingham North</i>) (Lab) | Mann, John (<i>Bassetlaw</i>) (Lab) |
| † Barwell, Gavin (<i>Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household</i>) | † Milling, Amanda (<i>Cannock Chase</i>) (Con) |
| † Coffey, Dr Thérèse (<i>Deputy Leader of the House of Commons</i>) | Neill, Robert (<i>Bromley and Chislehurst</i>) (Con) |
| Coyle, Neil (<i>Bermondsey and Old Southwark</i>) (Lab) | † Onn, Melanie (<i>Great Grimsby</i>) (Lab) |
| † Freer, Mike (<i>Finchley and Golders Green</i>) (Con) | † Smith, Jeff (<i>Manchester, Withington</i>) (Lab) |
| † Hall, Luke (<i>Thornbury and Yate</i>) (Con) | † Smith, Royston (<i>Southampton, Itchen</i>) (Con) |
| Hopkins, Kelvin (<i>Luton North</i>) (Lab) | † Tolhurst, Kelly (<i>Rochester and Strood</i>) (Con) |
| Knight, Sir Greg (<i>East Yorkshire</i>) (Con) | Ben Williams, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| † Lilley, Mr Peter (<i>Hitchin and Harpenden</i>) (Con) | † attended the Committee |

Eighth Delegated Legislation Committee

Tuesday 24 November 2015

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

[Relevant documents for debate: the Fourth Report 2015 from the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, Appointment of an Electoral Commissioner, HC 580, and the Third Report 2015 from the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, Appointment of the Chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, HC 560.]

8.55 am

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I beg to move,

That the Committee has considered the motion, That in pursuance of paragraph 2A of Schedule 3 of the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, as amended, Bronwen Curtis be appointed as lay member of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority, for a period of four years from 26 January 2016.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

Motion 2—Electoral Commission—

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Rob Vincent as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2016 for the period ending on 31 December 2019.

Motion 3—Local Government Boundary Commission for England—

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Professor Colin Mellors as Chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England with effect from 1 January 2016 for the period ending on 31 December 2020.

Dr Coffey: It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship for the first time, Mr Wilson. It is good to see you in your place. I know that you spent many distinguished years serving as an Opposition Whip.

The first motion proposes that Bronwen Curtis be appointed as a lay member of the Speaker's Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority for four years from 26 January 2016. SCIPSA is a statutory committee, created by the Parliamentary Standards Act 2009, and is responsible for the oversight of the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority through appointing board members to IPSA and by approving the organisation's estimate. The vacancy has arisen due to the term of Dame Janet Gaymer, one of SCIPSA's current lay members, coming to an end on 25 January. I am sure that this Committee would like to put on the record its thanks to Dame Janet for her service. SCIPSA produced an explanatory memorandum in relation to the motion, which has been made available to hon. Members in the Vote Office. I have also ensured that members of this Committee have been sent copies of the explanatory memorandum, together with the other reports that relate to our debate today.

The candidate named in the motion, Bronwen Curtis, has been a civil service commissioner, the chairman of the Northampton General Hospital NHS Trust, and a member of various review bodies. The duration of appointments as lay members of SCIPSA are staggered to provide continuity for the Committee. Accordingly, the motion provides that Ms Curtis should be appointed for four years.

The second motion proposes that an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Rob Vincent as an electoral commissioner for four years from 1 January 2016. The Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission has produced a report in relation to this motion. The vacancy arose following the decision of Max Caller to resign from the commission when he was appointed the commissioner for Tower Hamlets by the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government. I am sure that this Committee would like to thank Max Caller for his service. This recruitment was conducted, at the request of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, by a board, which recommended Rob Vincent. Mr Vincent served as chief executive of Kirklees Council from 2004 to 2010 and was a non-executive director for the Department for Communities and Local Government from 2008 to 2010. Between 2010 and 2012, Mr Vincent led the intervention into Doncaster Metropolitan Borough Council, at the request of the then Secretary of State. Most recently, he has acted as an adviser to the Department of Health on the transition of public health from the NHS to local government.

The final motion before the Committee proposes that an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Professor Colin Mellors as the chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England for five years from 1 January 2016 to 31 December 2020. Again, the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission has produced a report in relation to this motion. The LGBCE is responsible for reviewing local authority electoral arrangements and can also conduct reviews of the structure of local government and the external boundaries of local authorities.

The vacancy has arisen because the current chair, Max Caller, is approaching the maximum permitted length of service. The recruitment was conducted, at the request of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission by a board, which made this unanimous recommendation. Professor Mellors is the current deputy chair of the LGBCE. His most recent executive role was as the pro-vice-chancellor of the University of York. He has been involved in several economic development activities across Yorkshire and the Humber and is a board member of the York and North Yorkshire local enterprise partnership.

In summary, this Committee is being asked to consider motions to appoint Bronwen Curtis as a lay member of SCIPSA for four years, Rob Vincent as an electoral commissioner for four years, and Professor Colin Mellors as chair of the LGBCE for five years. I hope that the Committee, and ultimately the House, will support the appointments and wish those individuals well as they take up their new posts.

8.59 am

Mr Graham Allen (Nottingham North) (Lab): First, I apologise for arriving late and breathless; I was trying to deal with a constituency matter.

The appointments are important, and the Committee should really satisfy itself that the people whom we are putting forward are appropriate for the tasks ahead of them, which are very onerous indeed. One of the roles relates to IPSA, which is a matter of great sensitivity and high importance to members of the public. It is important to get the right person who understands both sides of the House, how Members of Parliament work and the public's expectations about what we should be doing and how we should do it when using public money. I apologise if I missed this, but I would like to hear a little more from the Minister about whether the proper processes were followed in respect of these appointments, and whether the people, particularly in relation to the IPSA appointment, are well qualified.

Exactly the same applies to the Electoral Commission, because some significant issues are currently affecting our democracy, including the drawing of future constituency boundaries, and every Member of Parliament has a great sensitivity about such issues. We should not consider lightly the question of who should be involved with local government boundaries and the Electoral Commission. If someone has been plucked from a list of the great and the good, they will be okay and they will not rock the boat, but this is perhaps a period when serious scrutiny—more serious than ever—is necessary because of how the Government have politicised the process around the boundary proposals.

The Government still have proposals on the table to reduce the number of Members of Parliament by 50, which will squeeze out those areas that do not have good numbers on the register. That may apply particularly to areas like mine and perhaps yours, Mr Wilson, where high numbers of people are not on the register. The problem applies particularly to inner-city areas like mine and some rural places, which I understand that you represent, Mr Wilson. It is important that we get someone with a view about how to get people on the register, which is an important part of our democracy. If that is not done, it will be a great injustice. This is about the Electoral Commission and getting people registered so that they can play their full part in our democracy. It is not some cosy procedural nicety whereby we put someone on the committee and the job is done. We need people to speak up for the 17 million disfranchised people in this country. They need someone on the Electoral Commission to pipe up for them.

My other concern relating to the Electoral Commission is that the concept has now entered our vocabulary of “voter suppression”, with which Martin Luther King and others would be very familiar. We need someone on the Electoral Commission who will look to voter engagement and go against this tide of voter suppression. I will provide two brief examples. First, in order to register, a person now needs to provide a national insurance number. Many people have it in their head—I do not—but for many others it is a little bar to filling out the forms. *[Interruption.]* I do not know whether the officials think this is funny, but perhaps they could do me the courtesy of listening to my argument. I know that it is an encumbrance to have elected Members on their feet talking about such matters.

Dr Coffey: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Allen: Not just yet.

Dr Coffey: On a point of order, Mr Wilson. I just want to understand how a discussion about electoral registration is relevant to the people whom we are discussing today. The matter has already been through Parliament in both primary and secondary legislation.

The Chair: I ask Mr Allen to stick to the appointments. We do not want a wider debate on electoral registration.

Mr Allen: The Government will get their way, so they should not object too much to an elected representative squeaking as the steamroller approaches.

Clearly, the person who is appointed and the process of appointment are very important when looking at a trend within the institutions that we are concerned about—particularly the Electoral Commission—to make it more difficult rather than easier for people to vote or register. That is my simple point on registration. We are now hearing from the Electoral Commission—this person will serve with and interact with the Electoral Commission—that passports may be required for individuals to vote on the day. As anyone would say, particularly if they represent a tougher demography, that may well be enough to put a lot of people off. Even one person being put off by that is too many, so we need someone on these bodies to stick up for the non-registered and for voter registration.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): With regard to the Electoral Commission, there is substantial representation from the political parties on a quarterly basis, so many of these issues could be raised through that avenue. On the specific appointments, there has been substantial scrutiny and consideration of the individuals who have been put forward, including of their background and the contributions that they can offer. The Deputy Leader of the House has given an extensive briefing on their qualifications, experience and talents that they would lend to the specific roles. The Opposition's position is that we are satisfied that my hon. Friend's concerns will be addressed and that the individuals proposed will be open to listening to the political parties' views through the appropriate channels at the Electoral Commission and other bodies.

Mr Allen: I am delighted that the Front Benchers are happy with this process. Using what little experience I have as the Chair of the Political and Constitutional Reform Committee for the past five years and from holding the Electoral Commission to account on a very regular basis—probably even more often than quarterly—the points I wish to make are on behalf of 17 million people who are not on the register. For those people, the tide is now turning away from the extension of the franchise that we have had for 170 years and towards making it more difficult for people to vote and more difficult for people to register. I just want the Minister to reassure us that the people involved in appointments to IPSA and related bodies are the sort of people who will stand up for the individual voter and elector and not always just for Front-Bench interests.

9.8 am

Dr Coffey: I found that speech rather insulting. This process has gone through the Speaker's Committees for each of these bodies. I do not know whether the hon. Gentleman—I was going to ask him—has had time to

[Dr Thérèse Coffey]

read the reports that were sent to him in advance of today's meeting, but if he has, he will know the extensive processes that we have gone through. Rob Vincent was chief executive of Kirklees Council—as I said earlier, though the hon. Gentleman was not here for the start of our consideration today—and he was the registration officer for that council, so he certainly has experience of registration issues.

I expect hon. Members to recognise the process that the proposals have gone through. The Speaker follows best practice guidance from the Office of the Commissioner for Public Appointments. We have had panels of independent people and the involvement of Members of Parliament, and the Government have been particularly involved. This has been done through the Speaker's Committees and considered under the processes of the House. I endorse the opinions of the boards and the Speaker's Committees in making these recommendations today.

Question put and agreed to.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Resolved,

That the Committee has considered the motion, That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Rob Vincent as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2016 for the period ending on 31 December 2019.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT BOUNDARY COMMISSION FOR ENGLAND

Resolved,

That the Committee has considered the motion, That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Professor Colin Mellors as Chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England with effect from 1 January 2016 for the period ending on 31 December 2020.

9.10 am

Committee rose.