

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Seventh Delegated Legislation Committee

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Monday 13 June 2016

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: MR PETER BONE

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| † Ali, Rushanara (<i>Bethnal Green and Bow</i>) (Lab) | † Haselhurst, Sir Alan (<i>Saffron Walden</i>) (Con) |
| † Barwell, Gavin (<i>Comptroller of Her Majesty's Household</i>) | McFadden, Mr Pat (<i>Wolverhampton South East</i>) (Lab) |
| † Borwick, Victoria (<i>Kensington</i>) (Con) | Mitchell, Mr Andrew (<i>Sutton Coldfield</i>) (Con) |
| Byrne, Liam (<i>Birmingham, Hodge Hill</i>) (Lab) | † Morris, Grahame M. (<i>Easington</i>) (Lab) |
| † Coffey, Dr Thérèse (<i>Deputy Leader of the House of Commons</i>) | † Onn, Melanie (<i>Great Grimsby</i>) (Lab) |
| † Coyle, Neil (<i>Bermondsey and Old Southwark</i>) (Lab) | † Tugendhat, Tom (<i>Tonbridge and Malling</i>) (Con) |
| † Davies, Mims (<i>Eastleigh</i>) (Con) | Whitford, Dr Philippa (<i>Central Ayrshire</i>) (SNP) |
| † Djanogly, Mr Jonathan (<i>Huntingdon</i>) (Con) | Danielle Nash, Peter Stam, <i>Committee Clerks</i> |
| † Freer, Mike (<i>Finchley and Golders Green</i>) (Con) | |
| † Hall, Luke (<i>Thornbury and Yate</i>) (Con) | † attended the Committee |

Seventh Delegated Legislation Committee

Monday 13 June 2016

[MR PETER BONE *in the Chair*]

Electoral Commission

4.30 pm

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

That the Committee has considered the motion, That an Humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will reappoint Alasdair Morgan as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 October 2016 for the period ending on 30 September 2020.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

Alasdair Morgan has served as an electoral commissioner since 12 May 2014 and his current term of appointment ends on 30 September this year. The Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission has produced a report, its second in 2016, relating to this motion and I arranged for it to be emailed to members of the Committee earlier today. It may help if I set out the key points for the record.

Electoral commissioners are appointed under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, as amended by the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009. Under the Acts, the Speaker's Committee has a responsibility to oversee the selection of candidates for appointment to the Electoral Commission, including the reappointment of commissioners. Mr Morgan is one of the four nominated commissioners—someone who has been put forward to be a commissioner by the registered leader of a political party. Three of the four nominated commissioners are put forward by the leaders of the three largest parties in the House of Commons. The fourth commissioner is nominated by the leaders of the other parties at Westminster.

Mr Morgan was previously nominated to the commission by the leader of the Scottish National party, supported by some of the other smaller nominating parties at Westminster. However, in view of the changes to the balance of the political parties at the 2015 general election, Mr Morgan's name is now being put forward by the leader of the SNP as the commissioner nominated by the third largest party in the House of Commons. In consequence, David Howarth, who is currently serving as a commissioner, having been nominated by the leader of the Liberal Democrats, will continue to serve on the commission, but as the representative of the smaller parties at Westminster. When his term expires, the minor parties will have an opportunity to nominate a new electoral commissioner.

Before recommending Mr Morgan's reappointment, the Committee received evidence from Jenny Watson, chair of the commission, about Mr Morgan's effectiveness as a commissioner. Ms Watson noted that Mr Morgan had made a significant contribution to the commission's response to the Law Commission's review of electoral law and had served as a member of the Electoral Commission's audit committee. She also said his political knowledge and significant experience of the practicalities of campaigning were useful to the Commission. The Speaker's Committee reported that, having considered Ms Watson's submissions, it was content to recommend this reappointment.

When the Speaker's Committee has reached a decision, statute requires the Speaker to consult the leaders of political parties represented at Westminster on the proposed reappointment. The statutory consultation provides an opportunity for the party leaders to comment, but they are not required to do so. Four leaders responded on this occasion: Mike Nesbitt for the Ulster Unionist party, Nicola Sturgeon for the SNP, the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) for the Labour party and my right hon. Friend the Member for Witney (Mr Cameron) for the Conservatives, all of whom were content with Mr Morgan's reappointment. Their responses to the consultation have been published by the Speaker's Committee as an appendix to its report.

If the appointment is agreed, Alasdair Morgan will continue to serve on the Electoral Commission until September 2020. I am sure his expertise will continue to be appreciated by the commission and I hope that Alasdair Morgan will have the support of this Committee and of the House.

4.33 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Bone.

We recognise that Alasdair Morgan has served as an electoral commissioner since May 2014 and is the only commissioner who currently has any direct experience of campaigns and campaigning north of the border, which is an important practical perspective for the commission.

On the basis of Mr Morgan's performance, the chair of the commission is content for him to be reappointed. Are the Government satisfied that the commission has a suitable process of performance appraisal for commissioners? Could the commission do more to give confidence to the public and interested parties that these positions are effective roles that drive its agenda in the right direction? How can the public have confidence that all commissioners are playing a full and functioning role within the commission, and are not just acquiescing voices that fail properly to challenge as and when necessary?

4.34 pm

Dr Coffey: I thank the hon. Lady for her query. Mr Morgan was an MP from 1997 to 2001, and then became a Member of the Scottish Parliament from 2001 to 2011, so he has extensive scrutiny experience. I believe he continues to serve as a trustee of the Scottish parliamentary pension fund, so he is a trusted figure in that regard and assiduous in his duties.

The hon. Lady raises an interesting point. That said, the Electoral Commission is an independent body. I think it would be worth referring her questions—I am happy to do so on her behalf or she may wish to do so directly—to the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission for consideration.

The Chair: I may have been asleep, but I thought that was an intervention. I thought, Minister, that you were intervening on the shadow Minister, because you jumped up before I had a chance to look round to see whether anyone else wanted to be involved in this exciting debate. However, if you have finished, I am happy.

Dr Coffey: I have, sorry.

Question put and agreed to.

4.35 pm

Committee rose.