

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

ELECTORAL COMMISSION (MOTIONS)

Monday 31 October 2016

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not later than

Friday 4 November 2016

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: PHIL WILSON

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| † Burt, Alistair (<i>North East Bedfordshire</i>) (Con) | † Smith, Julian (<i>Vice-Chamberlain of Her Majesty's Household</i>) |
| † Campbell, Mr Alan (<i>Tynemouth</i>) (Lab) | † Smyth, Karin (<i>Bristol South</i>) (Lab) |
| † Drummond, Mrs Flick (<i>Portsmouth South</i>) (Con) | † Thomas, Derek (<i>St Ives</i>) (Con) |
| † Ellis, Michael (<i>Deputy Leader of the House of Commons</i>) | Tugendhat, Tom (<i>Tonbridge and Malling</i>) (Con) |
| † Grady, Patrick (<i>Glasgow North</i>) (SNP) | Vaizey, Mr Edward (<i>Wantage</i>) (Con) |
| † Hollinrake, Kevin (<i>Thirsk and Malton</i>) (Con) | † Vaz, Valerie (<i>Walsall South</i>) (Lab) |
| Hosie, Stewart (<i>Dundee East</i>) (SNP) | † Warburton, David (<i>Somerton and Frome</i>) (Con) |
| † Hunt, Tristram (<i>Stoke-on-Trent Central</i>) (Lab) | Ben Williams, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| † Johnson, Gareth (<i>Dartford</i>) (Con) | |
| Jones, Graham (<i>Hyndburn</i>) (Lab) | |
| † Reynolds, Emma (<i>Wolverhampton North East</i>) (Lab) | † attended the Committee |

Second Delegated Legislation Committee

Monday 31 October 2016

[PHIL WILSON *in the Chair*]

Electoral Commission (Motions)

4.30 pm

The Deputy Leader of the House of Commons (Michael Ellis): 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 appoint Sir John Holmes as the Chair of the Electoral Commission with effect from 1 January 2017 for the period ending on 31 December 2020.

The Chair: With this it will be convenient to discuss the following motion, on the Electoral Commission,

That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty praying that Her Majesty will appoint Dame Susan Bruce as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2017 for the period ending on 31 December 2020.

Michael Ellis: It is a pleasure to appear before you, Mr Wilson.

The Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission has produced a report—its fourth of 2016—in relation to the first motion. The vacancy has arisen because the term of office of the current chair of the commission, Jenny Watson, comes to an end on 31 December 2016. I am sure that the Committee would like to thank Ms Watson for her service as chair for the past eight years.

Appointments to the Electoral Commission are made under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, as amended by the Political Parties and Elections Act 2009, under which the Speaker's Committee has the responsibility of overseeing the selection of candidates for appointment. Commissioners are appointed for a fixed term and may be reappointed for up to a maximum term length of 10 years. As is normal for such appointments, the Speaker's Committee established a recruitment panel to oversee the shortlisting and interviewing of candidates and, given the importance of the role, it asked the Commissioner for Public Appointments to appoint a public appointment assessor to chair the panel. The commissioner nominated Mark Addison, a former civil service commissioner, to that role, and the other members of the panel were Max Caller, a former electoral commissioner and former chair of the Local Government Boundary Commission for England, Dr Jane Martin, a local government ombudsman for England, and my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon (Mr Streeter), a member of the Speaker's Committee. The unanimous view of the panel was that Sir John Holmes should be appointed as chair of the Electoral Commission.

Sir John's most recent role was director of the Ditchley Foundation, an organisation established to promote transatlantic dialogue and understanding of international policy issues. The majority of Sir John's executive career was spent working in foreign affairs, in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office and as a foreign affairs adviser to two Prime Ministers. After leaving the Foreign and

Commonwealth Office, where his final role was as British ambassador to France, he moved to the United Nations to be the under-secretary-general for humanitarian affairs and emergency relief co-ordinator.

The Committee received the panel's report in April and put the name of the recommended candidate forward for consultation with the leaders of the political parties represented here at Westminster, as is required by statute. This statutory consultation provides an opportunity for the party leaders to comment, but they are not required to do so. The responses received are published in the Speaker's Committee report. Following the consultation with the party leaders, the Speaker's Committee held a public meeting with Sir John, to test his suitability for the role and discuss his priorities for the commission. The transcript of that session can be found on the Committee's website. Following that meeting, the Committee agreed to recommend Sir John's appointment to the House.

The Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission has produced a report—its third of 2016—in relation to the second motion, that Dame Susan Bruce will serve on the commission as the electoral commissioner with special responsibility for Scotland.

The vacancy has arisen because the term of office of John McCormick, the current commissioner with special responsibility for Scotland, comes to an end on 31 December 2016, and I am sure that the Committee would wish to join me in thanking him for his service. The Speaker's Committee appointed a recruitment panel to oversee the shortlisting and interviewing of candidates for this role also, and asked Judith Alderton, an independent human resources professional with experience of senior recruitment, to chair the recruitment panel. The Speaker's Committee agreed that a nominee of the Scottish Parliament should take part in the recruitment exercise for the role, to reflect the Electoral Commission's increased accountability to the Scottish Parliament for its work in Scotland since the Scotland Act 2016. The other panel members were Jenny Watson, chair of the Electoral Commission; Graeme Pearson, former MSP for South Scotland; my hon. Friend the Member for South West Devon, and the hon. Member for Perth and North Perthshire (Pete Wishart), who are both members of the Speaker's Committee.

The panel's unanimous view was that Dame Susan Bruce DBE should be appointed as an electoral commissioner with special responsibility for Scotland. Dame Susan currently holds a number of senior non-executive positions in Scotland, spanning the public and private sectors. Before taking on those roles, her career was in local government: she was chief executive of Aberdeen City Council and then of the City of Edinburgh Council. The Speaker's Committee received the board's report in April and agreed to the nomination. Dame Susan's name was then put forward for the statutory consultation with the leaders of the political parties represented here at Westminster. The responses received to that consultation are published in the Speaker's Committee's report.

In summary, this Committee is being asked to consider motions to appoint Sir John Holmes as chair of the Electoral Commission for four years and Dame Susan Bruce as an electoral commissioner for four years. I hope that the Committee, and ultimately the House, will support their appointments and wish them well as they take up their new posts.

4.36 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Wilson. I thank the Deputy Leader of the House for his speech; I join him in thanking Jenny Watson, outgoing chair of the Electoral Commission, for all her hard work.

For both appointments, the process of selection and interview has been rigorous. It has included consulting party leaders—I think the former Prime Minister actually responded—and for the first time the Scottish Parliament was consulted on the appointment of the electoral commissioner responsible for Scotland. The process has been open, transparent and accountable to Parliament, with reports published on 19 July 2016 and 10 October 2016. I am sure that the new appointees will look forward to the challenges of addressing the 50 recommendations of “Securing the ballot”, the report by the right hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Sir Eric Pickles).

The Labour party has some concerns about individual electoral registration and ending the transition arrangements earlier. The Electoral Commission may want to review the situation to ensure that people have not been disfranchised and are on the register, so that they can take full part in the democratic process.

The candidates’ backgrounds are set out in the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission’s third and fourth reports of 2016, and we can see that they both have extensive experience. The Opposition fully endorse those reports and the motions.

4.38 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I am happy to add the Scottish National party’s support to the motions. We welcome the involvement of the Scottish Parliament—and, indeed, of my hon. Friend the Member for Perth and North Perthshire—in the appointment of the electoral commissioner for Scotland. If my calculations are correct, the appointments will take the gender balance on the board from 7:3 to 6:4, so we are getting closer to the 50:50 target that I am sure we all want to achieve and that the First Minister of Scotland has set for public bodies to achieve by 2020, as I am sure hon. Members know.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the Committee has considered the motion, That an humble Address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Sir John Holmes as the Chair of the Electoral Commission with effect from 1 January 2017 for the period ending on 31 December 2020.

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 Dame Susan Bruce as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 January 2017 for the period ending on 31 December 2020.—(*Michael Ellis.*)

4.39 pm

Committee rose.

