

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

Sixth Delegated Legislation Committee

ELECTORAL COMMISSION

Tuesday 20 November 2018

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Saturday 24 November 2018

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The Committee consisted of the following Members:

Chair: MS KAREN BUCK

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| † Campbell, Mr Alan (<i>Tynemouth</i>) (Lab) | † Phillipson, Bridget (<i>Houghton and Sunderland South</i>) (Lab) |
| † Crabb, Stephen (<i>Preseli Pembrokeshire</i>) (Con) | † Powell, Lucy (<i>Manchester Central</i>) (Lab/Co-op) |
| † Duffield, Rosie (<i>Canterbury</i>) (Lab) | † Prentis, Victoria (<i>Banbury</i>) (Con) |
| † Fysh, Mr Marcus (<i>Yeovil</i>) (Con) | † Ross, Douglas (<i>Moray</i>) (Con) |
| † Jones, Mr David (<i>Clwyd West</i>) (Con) | † Smith, Laura (<i>Crewe and Nantwich</i>) (Lab) |
| † Leadsom, Andrea (<i>Leader of the House of Commons</i>) | † Throup, Maggie (<i>Erewash</i>) (Con) |
| † McMorrin, Anna (<i>Cardiff North</i>) (Lab) | † Vaz, Valerie (<i>Walsall South</i>) (Lab) |
| † Maynard, Paul (<i>Lord Commissioner of Her Majesty's Treasury</i>) | † Vickers, Martin (<i>Cleethorpes</i>) (Con) |
| † Phillips, Jess (<i>Birmingham, Yardley</i>) (Lab) | Mike Everett, <i>Committee Clerk</i> |
| | † attended the Committee |

Sixth Delegated Legislation Committee

Tuesday 20 November 2018

[Ms KAREN BUCK *in the Chair*]

Electoral Commission

[Relevant document: the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, Third Report 2018, Appointment of nominated Commissioners, HC 1727, 15 November 2018.]

2.30 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Andrea Leadsom):

I beg to move,

That an humble address be presented to Her Majesty, praying that Her Majesty will appoint Lord Gilbert of Panteg and Joan Walley as Electoral Commissioners with effect from 1 November 2018 for the period ending on 31 October 2022; and Alastair Ross as an Electoral Commissioner with effect from 1 November 2018 for the period ending on 31 October 2020.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Buck. The Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission has produced a report—its third of 2018—in relation to this motion. 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 Act, the Speaker's Committee has a responsibility to oversee the selection of candidates for appointment to the Electoral Commission, including the reappointment of commissioners.

Lord Gilbert, Alastair Ross and Joan Walley will be three of four nominated commissioners. Nominated commissioners are persons 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 with two or more seats in the House of Commons. The appointment of three new nominated commissioners is required because the term of office of John Horam, Bridget Prentice and David Howarth came to an end on 30 September 2018.

In November 2017, the Speaker wrote to the leaders of the Conservative party, the Labour party and all parties with two or more Members of the House of Commons asking for their nominations to replace the outgoing nominated commissioners. The Scottish National party, as the current third largest party in the House of Commons, was not written to on this occasion because its nominated commissioner's term of office does not end until 2020.

Each party eligible to put forward nominations was asked to nominate three candidates who could be interviewed and assessed against criteria by an interview panel appointed by Mr Speaker. The panel consisted of Dame Denise Platt, the independent Chair; Sir John Holmes, the chair of the Electoral Commission; the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), a member of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission; and my hon. Friend the Member for

Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns), who is also a member of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission.

The panel's unanimous recommendation was that Lord Gilbert of Panteg go forward as the Conservative nominated commissioner. Lord Gilbert is a Member of the House of Lords and chairs the Communications Committee. He has over 30 years' political service and has held a number of senior roles in the Conservative party, including director of campaigning, deputy chairman, and political secretary to the Prime Minister.

The panel's unanimous recommendation was that Joan Walley should go forward as the Labour nominated commissioner. Joan Walley is a former MP for Stoke-on-Trent North, and a former Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee. Since leaving Parliament, Ms Walley has also taken on several non-executive roles.

The panel's unanimous recommendation was that Alastair Ross should go forward as the nominated commissioner for the smaller parties. Mr Ross was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly until 2017 and held ministerial office in the Executive Office. He chaired the Committee for Justice and the Committee on Standards and Privileges. He has also been a member of the Northern Ireland policing commission.

The Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission considered the panel's report and recommendations, and agreed to recommend that Lord Gilbert of Panteg, Alastair Ross and Joan Walley be appointed as electoral commissioners. It is the usual practice of the Speaker's Committee to recommend that electoral commissioners be appointed for a period of four years. In the case of the commissioner representing the smaller parties, the usual practice is for the committee to recommend that the commissioner be appointed for two years, to allow for more frequent rotation between the smaller parties, if desired.

Once the Speaker's Committee has reached a decision, statute requires that the Speaker consult the leaders of political parties represented at Westminster on the proposed reappointments. The statutory consultation provides an opportunity for the party leaders to comment, but they are not required to do so. No objections to these candidates were received in response to this consultation.

Lucy Powell (Manchester Central) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Leader of the House have any thoughts on why only the Labour party ever seems to put forward women for these roles, while the Conservative party and the smaller parties always seem to put men forward?

Andrea Leadsom: I absolutely share the hon. Lady's desire to see more women in those roles. I cannot answer her question, but it is on the record and I am sure that we will see change over time.

In conclusion, should the House support the appointments, Lord Gilbert and Joan Walley will take up their new posts and serve as electoral commissioners for a period of four years and Alastair Ross for a period of two years. I commend the motion to the Committee.

2.35 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Buck. I thank the Leader of the House for speaking to the motion and also the interview panel appointed by Mr Speaker, the independent chair, Dame Denise Platt, and the chair of

the Electoral Commission, and the members of the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East. Let me also place on record our thanks to outgoing commissioners, John Horam, David Howarth and Bridget Prentice, whose term of office came to an end on 30 September 2018. I note that the report, to which the Leader of the House alluded, refers to a delay by the political parties in responding to the Speaker's letter in November 2017.

The panel's unanimous verdict was that Lord Gilbert of Panteg, Alastair Ross and Joan Walley be appointed as electoral commissioners. Her Majesty's Opposition endorse the appointments. Lord Gilbert of Panteg has over 30 years' experience of political service and has held a number of senior roles in the Conservative party, including political secretary to the Prime Minister. He is currently still in the legislature, albeit in the other place. Can the Leader of the House confirm there are no conflicts relating to his appointment, including his terms of office on any Joint Committees on which he serves?

All will have to abide by the Nolan principles, but can the Leader of the House confirm that, as a member of a lobbying company, Lord Gilbert does not currently represent any firms relating to data analytics, and whether he has had any dealings with firms currently or previously investigated by the Electoral Commission or that have broken electoral law?

Alastair Ross was a Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly until 2017 and held ministerial office in the Executive Office. Mr Ross has valuable experience as Chair of the Committee for Justice and the Committee on Standards and Privileges. As an elected representative in a different jurisdiction, his appointment will be beneficial to the Electoral Commission.

Those two candidates are not known to me, but Joan Walley is. She was the MP for Stoke-on-Trent North for 28 years, during which time she chaired the Environmental

Audit Committee for five years. Her experience as Chair of that Committee will serve her well on the Electoral Commission. Since leaving Parliament, she has taken on several non-executive roles, which have obviously given her relevant board experience.

Subject to those questions, Her Majesty's Opposition endorse the appointments of these three commissioners.

2.38 pm

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments and for her question. The Speaker's panel is set up by the Speaker. I am here as Leader of the House to put forward the recommendations of the panel. She has asked a very serious and sensible question, but I cannot answer it; it is not a matter that I was at all involved in. As I say, I am here to put forward the recommendations of the panel. As a fellow member of the House of Commons Commission, she will know that for each of those panels the Speaker does a significant amount of due diligence, so I am quite confident that any issues of conflict would have been addressed. I do not want to raise any doubts about that, but I cannot answer the question as I have not been involved in the matter. If she has reservations, she should take them up with the Speaker's Office directly.

Valerie Vaz: The Leader of the House is speaking to a motion in her name, and I am sure she will be able to write to me or will have an answer to those questions when the House comes to endorse the appointments.

Andrea Leadsom: I am happy to agree.

Question put and agreed to.

2.40 pm

Committee rose.

