

SOLACE Annual Elections Conference

2020

Firstly, thank you sincerely for all the work you did last year. It's no easy feat doing that many elections in that one year. I want you to know how grateful I am along with my team at the Cabinet Office for the effort you would have to put in.

I want to thank you and your elections teams for all your hard work in delivering the first December General Election since 1923.

Elections were a bit different back then. In 1923:

- people under the age of 21 and women under 30 couldn't vote
- postal voting was more or less non-existent except for some in the armed forces
- and of course there was no Exit Poll, no Twitter and no Sir John Curtice, to keep us amused as the night went on!

There was another important difference as well...

That election resulted in a hung Parliament and another General Election within months, whereas we start this new decade with a stable majority government.

And I know the run up to any election and Polling Day is an intensive period for you and your wider teams.

The pressures will only have been magnified with the short notice and timing of the December election, bringing with it additional challenges and considerations, including on weather, staffing and supplier costs. It's a very big thank you.

I want to talk about the year ahead and about and what lies ahead in our democracy and constitution.

Over the last few years, and over the last year in particular, our politics, institutions and democracy have all come under significant strain.

The recent anger, dismay and disillusionment felt by many voters is a stark reminder that we must not take for granted.

Despite our long democratic traditions and our international reputation as a mature democracy, I don't think we should be complacent about the trust and confidence voters place in the system.

We are now aiming to restore that trust. Starting with the big ticket items – we will leave the EU at the end of the month, delivering on the 2016 referendum result.

We will then focus on our important domestic agenda.

As well as investing in our NHS, making our streets safer and transforming public services, we know constitutional and democratic reform is important.

One of the features of our constitution is that it has always evolved. We now have an opportunity to reflect on how it's working for the whole of the United Kingdom.

A constitutional commission, from our manifesto, will look at proposals to restore faith in our institutions and in how our democracy operates.

It's right that, as we look to make our constitution fit for the 21st century, we also take a step back and reflect on the fundamental principles that should underpin our elections and democratic processes to ensure we continue to stand on firm foundations.

First, elections are about the voters. Their choice rules. We respect their decisions.

Second principle, and to help them make decisions, we regulate for transparency and put information in their hands – like imprints. We have to update that for the digital age.

We regulate for elections to be fair – with a level playing field for political parties, both on the doorstep and now digitally, and ensuring each elector's vote has the same value, in equal constituencies.

We want elections to be inclusive – accessible for everyone to take part and that people from all backgrounds and walks of life are able to stand for election and do their part without threats, intimidation or abuse.

We are clear that elections are about this country, belonging to British citizens, so we are vigilant for foreign interference.

We value proper independence and accountability – with the administration and regulation of elections sitting apart from central or local government and free from political interference.

And we prize security as a principle – so that our democratic processes, systems and institutions are free from fraud, and from interference, including from cyber and physical threats.

Informed and guided by these principles, we need to modernise and update our democratic processes to protect them for the future.

Over the past decade, there have been big changes in how elections are fought. So it's now time we take a fresh look at how our electoral regulation is working.

That doesn't mean ripping up the rulebook and starting again, but it does mean taking a look at where we can make sensible changes. After all, the youngest voters of today were not even born when the current framework was

conceived. PPERA was 20 years ago. The main RPA was nearly 40 years ago.

The measures endorsed in our 2019 Manifesto, and which we are now taking forward, will help to ensure our electoral system better lives up to those principles and can protect our democracy.

We will replace the Fixed Term Parliaments Act that caused so much paralysis, uncertainty and a lack of democratic accountability in the last Parliament.

We will make elections fairer by introducing updated and equal Parliamentary boundaries so that every vote counts the same – and we think that's a cornerstone of democracy.

We will make elections more secure by introducing voter ID at polling stations and cracking down on postal vote harvesting as well.

And we will widen accessibility of our elections by making it easier for British citizens overseas to vote and get rid of the arbitrary 15-year limit on their voting rights.

We are working on plans and timelines for delivering all these things. I hope to be able to update you in the summer, including timings for introducing voter ID.

I'd like to take this opportunity to thank the ten local authorities who took part in the Voter ID pilots during the local elections last year.

Our evaluation published in the summer provided further insight into how best to ensure the security of the voting process and reduce the risk of voter fraud.

I know that to deliver this package of reform we must work in partnership with you and your elections teams and the sector, and we will continue to do so, as we have on other reforms we've been working on to modernise the electoral system.

Last year when I spoke to you, I set out our vision for making elections more accessible and encouraging more engagement in democracy.

I'm pleased with what we've been able to achieve since then.

I want to briefly highlight three areas of progress.

First, online registration.

This has been a huge leap forward and has helped ensure more people who are perhaps less likely to be registered are able to vote.

Over three quarters of the 47 million applications to register since June 2014 have been made online and user satisfaction with the Register to Vote website is regularly above 90 per cent.

Ahead of the December election, we saw almost four million registration

applications submitted, including a record of 659,666 applications on the day registration closed.

While this is great news, I know that managing the sheer volume of online registration applications in the run up to the deadline in the December election pushed elections teams to the max. I want to acknowledge that.

We will continue to look at ways we can improve the service and process of the electoral registration system and I'm happy to hear your thoughts about how we might be able to mitigate any impacts there.

Second, since your last conference, I think we've been making good progress to break down barriers that prevent people engaging in democracy, particularly those with disabilities.

Just the other week, I laid the final statutory instrument in parliament to make spending rules fairer for disabled candidates standing for a range of different types of elections.

We've also improved information on, and communication of, the registration online service, increasing the use of easy read guides and promotion of electors' rights.

At the December election, I was pleased that Returning Officers and their teams took on board our request to allow people with sight loss to use technology – in particular mobile phone apps – to help them read and mark their ballot papers.

This has received some very positive feedback on social media and in our discussions with relevant organisations.

We are building on this with further testing of assistive technology this month and looking at small projects to identify how materials for practicing to vote can assist people with learning difficulties and other mental health issues.

We're also looking at how information provided digitally can supplement traditional methods like poll cards where that benefits people with disabilities.

I want to work with partners to make sure that the revision of guidance and production of easy read information happens in the run up to each set of polls.

I'm grateful to you and your teams for your role in this work that helps support some of the more vulnerable people in our society to have their vote.

Finally, I want to highlight our progress in delivering canvass reform. We are working in partnership with elections teams across Great Britain to modernise the canvass process, giving Electoral Registration Officers the flexibility they need to run a tailored and more efficient canvass which better suits their local area.

The new canvass will make better use of locally held data sources and, for the first time, match registered electors against national government data.

This will allow the Electoral Registration Officers to streamline communications to households that have not changed since the previous year, whilst completing a comprehensive canvass on those properties where change is most likely to have occurred.

As you will know, this model for the canvass has been developed through consultation with the sector and 24 pilots with local authorities.

I would like to thank those authorities in the room who have contributed and helped us modernise the canvass in a way that works for your teams on the ground.

I am grateful for your continued support as we prepare for the launch of the reformed canvass from June this year.

While your elections team will be best placed to advise on how you can help, we expect they will need your support to work with teams across your authority including IT infrastructure and communications teams, plus teams holding local data, such as Council Tax, Housing and the Registrar's Office.

My officials are also providing support to your elections teams to deliver the changes, which as well as delivering more accurate electoral information will, of course, also deliver significant financial savings I think that's agreed to be an important incentive in anyone's book.

In the last four years, we've had two General Elections, a national referendum, a European Parliamentary election, as well as local elections and other polls held in each of those years across the United Kingdom.

I'm pleased we have Scotland and Wales, as well as England, represented here today. Working constructively across the nations of the Union is essential for the running of smooth electoral processes and to deliver reform successfully in a way that works for elections.

I know it's been a busy and unpredictable few years. I'm sure you will have channeled Brenda from Bristol on more than one occasion.

But you have risen to the challenge and I want to thank all the elections teams for supporting our democracy during this critical time and to you for the personal accountability and oversight you have for elections as Returning Officers.

Whilst 2020 is another busy year with over 100 English local council elections, forty Police and Crime Commissioner elections and elections for eight mayors in England, I know you will welcome the return to a more calm electoral cycle.

That relative stability will enable us, working closely with you and your teams, to plan and implement important reforms over this year and beyond so that our democracy and elections continue to be admired across the world and

command the confidence of voters.

Thank you very much for your time in listening.