

# Speech: Association of Electoral Administrators: Chris Skidmore speech

Thank you very much for the introduction.

I wanted to fly up from London to be here with you today, as I felt that it was important as Minister for the Constitution, and the minister responsible for elections and democratic engagement to speak with you directly, and to say thank you.

To thank you for the time and effort that all of you as electoral administrators, registration officers and returning officers, have given over the past trying few months.

To thank you for the role that you have played in making not only the Local Elections and the Mayoral Elections run as smoothly as possible, but also the integral role that you all performed in ensuring that the snap General Election took place without any significant problems.

And to thank you for the personal and family sacrifices that each and every one of you, together with your staff, have made to ensure that our democracy has been able to function seamlessly over these past few months.

As the minister responsible for the smooth running of the elections that have taken place this year, I will be writing to every Electoral Registration Officer personally, to thank them and their teams for the work that they have undertaken: but my thanks extends to all of you here in this room today.

To the casual observer or the media, reporting on General Election night, as images of ballot boxes being rushed into counting halls across the country filled the TV screens, of teams of counters sifting through thousands of ballots at counts across the country, it is all too easy to forget that behind each and every result that night was not just a political story of which party gained or lost seats, whose share of the vote went up or down, but also a story of dedication: your dedication to ensuring that our British democracy is the best it can be, and indeed the best in the world.

I know that it has not been easy, even if you have made it look that way.

At every stage, you have been tried and tested, but have come through with flying colours.

And you have done so because I know that each and every one of you believes passionately in giving every person who can vote in our democracy the right to have their say at the ballot box.

Over the past year as Minister for the Constitution, I have toured every region of the country in an effort to ensure that we can build a Democracy that Works for Everyone. What has struck me as I have spoken and discussed issues with Electoral Registration Officers at the roundtables and meetings I

have held, is your determination and your commitment to your vocation; a vocation that I believe deserves to be held in the highest regard. For there can be fewer duties more important than ensuring that democracy prevails.

At a time when, across the world, questions and challenges are being raised about the security of democratic processes and elections, I want you to know how proud I am, as the minister responsible for our electoral community, of your ability to deliver time and again polls which no observer, foreign or domestic, calls into question.

I know that I am addressing you here today as the Association of Electoral Administrators; however, in my mind you are not just 'administrators' but professionals, whose profession belongs to one of the finest traditions of public service. A public service that, at its core, I believe, runs that same devotion to social justice as you witness in our education or health services.

For we must recognise that the effective running and performance of elections is something which is not simply an administrative issue, focused on the technical measures of the elections process, but an essential public service. What you do, and what you have done so brilliantly over these past few months, has ensured that every member of our society, regardless of where they live, their background or whether they have a disability or health condition, has been able to have that equal chance, that equal right, to participate in our democracy, and to have their say.

This is social justice at its heart, and we, you, should not be afraid to say so.

For the first time voter, entering a polling station for the first time; for the unwell unable to vote who needed an emergency proxy; for military service personnel away on tour needing a postal vote; to the blind and partially sighted or those with a disability needing assistance, you were there to help each and every one of them be a part of our democracy.

Over the past year, I calculated that, taking the EU referendum, the PCC and local and mayoral elections and the General Election together, there has been nearly 114 million ballots cast across a period of less than a year. I believe that is a record number of votes cast in a single period of a year in the history of British democracy; testament not only to the strength of our democracy, but to your ability to have made this happen. Thank you.

In my last speech to Parliament before the General Election took place, I spoke about politicians being very much actors on the democratic stage; a stage which, behind the scenes, is managed and run smoothly by yourselves, the producers of these democratic displays that are our elections.

This year, your success has been particularly notable, not least when it has come to managing and processing the number of people who have registered to vote. Back in March, just under 24 million people had accessed the online IER system to register to vote since its creation, and I previously had been talking to officials about a plan to celebrate us passing the 25 million

mark. The General Election was then called, resulting in the number of people who have now registered to vote using the system reaching over 27 million (27,633,473 to be precise).

On the deadline day for registration for the recent General Election as we approached the midnight deadline, over 622,000 people applied to register to vote, compared with 525,000 on the last day for the EU Referendum and 485,000 on the last day for the 2015 General Election.

Informal estimates suggest that the number of people registered to vote now stands at a record high of 46.9 million, up from 46.4 million in 2015.

And while this is cause itself to celebrate the growing levels of participation in our democracy, I recognise the challenges that this brings to each and every one of your staff and offices. Challenges that I want to work with you to help resolve, and to assist you in the work that you already do so brilliantly.

I have not come here today to make a brand new policy announcement. The General Election, along with the local and Mayoral elections, provides a period of important reflection to learn what needs improvement, and what can be done better, and I look forward to the AEA's own reports on these issues. I want to continue my full engagement with your organisation, and for you to know that if there are issues that you wish to raise through your own executive, my door is always open to listen and engage with the AEA.

I want to ensure that your relationship between government, through the Cabinet Office, and the AEA remains a strong one, where we work together for the people who, together, we both serve: the voters whose experience of electoral registration and at the ballot box deserves to be the best it can be.

When I last addressed the AEA at your conference in Brighton earlier this year – a different world politically – I announced the establishment of an Electoral Summit, to be held with the AEA's participation. I am still planning on holding this event later this year, and I hope that, through the AEA executive, it will provide a crucial means of reporting feedback into government, and strengthening and improving our electoral processes.

I am also still intending on launching the government's Democratic Engagement Strategy later this year, and I hope that, when this is complete, I will be able to build on the strong working relationship we have with the AEA, who have kindly been a constant presence at the roundtables that I have held exploring early work on this Strategy, by ensuring the AEA and the voice of electoral administrators and EROs will be heard in that process.

2017 has been a remarkable electoral year. But if I may end by turning to next year, 2018: not to discuss the local elections, though I am sure you are already turning your minds to your preparations for these, but to the fact that on 6 February, we will celebrate the 100th anniversary of women getting the right to vote. Of course, that was not even the equal right to vote, which came in July 1928, just ninety years ago.

For while we can talk of our democratic traditions being some of the oldest in the world, making reference to Magna Carta and the institution of Parliament, we all know in this room, that when it comes to the real face of democracy, with every person in every region across the country being given an equal right to vote, regardless of their gender or background, our democratic history remains a young one.

But in our shared history, we should not only recognise the enormous progress that has been made, celebrating those unsung heroes who fought for reform but also to recognise and celebrate the silent work of those who made it actually possible for ballots to be cast, the dedication of electoral administrators past and present.

And in reflecting upon our democratic history over these past hundred years, we can perhaps also reflect on not only how far we have come, but also what more we can do, together, to ensure that everyone who wants to make an application to register to vote, and go that one step further by casting their ballot, is given the opportunity to do so; to remove the last remaining barriers that still prevent certain groups of society from participating in elections through no fault of their own; and to make ours a democracy that works for everyone.

In this endeavour I look forward to continue to working with yourselves and the AEA.

Thank you.