

Speech: Skidmore: an effective democracy that works for everyone

I want to start by paying tribute to the work that the AEA has done over the last thirty years.

The AEA has travelled a long way since its first meeting of a few electoral administrators back in 1987, to the significant organisation it has become today. It is a reflection of the regard that government has for the AEA, that ministers such as myself, and in the past my colleagues and predecessors, have recognised the importance of coming to hear from you first hand, and to be part of a dialogue with the electoral community that AEA seeks to represent.

I am here today to thank you, not just for the work that you undertake, often under-recognised in wider society, in making elections run smoothly – but for the tireless effort that you give, year in year out, ensuring that every voice in every community is given the chance to matter in our democracy.

It is through that tireless work that we now have 46.5 million people on our electoral register, the largest number of people who have ever registered to vote, allowing a record number of voters to participate in the EU Referendum last year. I fully recognise that this was no easy task, especially with local elections and Police and Crime Commissioner Elections in May, but it is tribute to your professionalism, your planning and your ability that no one could accuse those elections, whatever they might have thought of the result, of not being held to the highest standards. The success of the 2016 elections is your success, and I want to thank you for making this happen.

It can be all too easy to see the work of electoral administrators and indeed the process of electoral registration as the so-called plumbing behind elections; to dismiss the work that you do as a means to an end; for registration simply to be seen as a precursor to an electoral event.

We all know that this is not the case. Electoral Registration is not only a crucial benchmark for the health of our democracy, it is the means by which individuals and communities can ensure that their voice is heard, the means by which those who are vulnerable, in need of representation, can engage fully in our democracy at every level. And the electoral register is not simply a list of voters gathered for the sake of convenience; it represents the foundation of our democracy – ensuring that every voice matters, and that each individual who joins that register can have the confidence to know that they have become a member of our democratic society, able to express their views at the ballot box, and to do so secretly and securely.

And for you, who work week in, week out, delivering the annual canvass, who work face to face encouraging registration; the work that you undertake, often laborious and challenging, is work that often goes unsung, yet is nothing less than a democratic vocation: at a time when we must constantly be

vigilant to remind people of the value that democracy can bring, enabling people to participate, to have their say should be viewed as one of the finest acts of public service, and I want to thank you for the public service that you perform so well.

At the heart of the AEA is your commitment to ensuring that effective democratic processes are delivered successfully, ensuring that we have a democracy that works for everyone.

I have been delighted with the close working that has developed between the AEA and the Cabinet Office; for the feedback that you have given us, and making known the challenges facing administrators. For me, engagement with your profession is crucial for the success of our democratic systems.

Individual Electoral Registration would not have succeeded without the AEA's considerable input, highlighting and illustrating risks and opportunities, using its expertise and first hand experience to frame solutions.

Yet we know that progress and change is still possible, and indeed if we are to meet the challenges that we face for the future, in particular those of 2020, I am keen to work with administrators to deliver reforms and safeguards to ensure that our elections are being completed accurately, securely and transparently. Already I have been holding roundtable discussions with administrators, in the north west, the east midlands, the east of England and in London, listening to the issues that you have raised and the solutions that you have; learning from the best practice that already exists out there, and hearing your concerns.

In September last year, I launched the government's strategy for a Democracy that Works for Everyone. It is a strategy that sets out not only manifesto commitments that the government intends to deliver upon, but also the work that we are doing to ensure that we can deliver a democracy that works for all. There are four pillars that I believe are central to the government's commitment to achieving this.

Equal seats

The first is equal seats: the reform of our constituency boundaries.

In the government's manifesto for the 2015 election, we recommitted to updating Parliamentary constituencies, a process that had already been legislated upon in the previous parliament so that the historic injustice of having some constituencies being twice, if not almost three times the size of another, would end. At the same time, the number of MPs will be reducing from 650 to 600, not only reducing the cost of politics by £66 million over the course of a Parliament, but also bringing the size of our primary chamber in line with other Western democracies.

To accomplish this, the current boundary review began in February 2016 and has made significant progress. The Boundary Commissions for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will submit final recommendations to Ministers in September 2018 and new Parliamentary constituencies will come

into effect at the General Election in May 2020.

Importantly, where a constituency boundary crosses more than one local authority area, it will fall to Ministers to designate the lead authority for running the poll in the constituency. This will need to be set out in a Statutory Instrument and we will consult with electoral administrators, the Electoral Commission and local authorities before making this decision.

Votes for life

The second pillar is votes for life.

Since I have taken office, I have set out for the first time how the government intends to implement our manifesto commitment to introduce votes for life for British citizens living overseas.

I fully recognise that this will mean a significant increase in the number of overseas electors; and while being clear that the government is determined to deliver on our manifesto commitment, I am open to your constructive feedback on the detail of the published proposals. There is an opportunity to refine the proposals, and if there are any changes that you believe could be made that would reduce administrative pressures by streamlining processes, then please do let the Cabinet Office know.

Every voice matters

The third pillar is to ensure that across every part of the UK, every voice matters.

Already, as part of the national tour that I have undertaken, I have met with over 100 organisations, including local authorities, schools and civil society organisations to understand the barriers to registration.

I recognise the great value and insight that electoral administrators are able to provide at that ground level. That's why I have hosted region wide roundtables with Electoral Service Managers across regions like North West, East Midlands and London.

Electoral Registration Officers have a vital role to play in maintaining the integrity, breadth, and efficiency of the electoral system. The ability to participate in our democracy depends upon the completeness and accuracy of the electoral register. This is of the utmost importance, and the government will continue to work closely with the electoral community to maintain and extend the improvements we have already made together.

With the recent EU Referendum conducted on the largest ever UK electoral register, we can be very proud of the progress our cooperation has brought. This has only been achieved thanks to the engagement and hard work of electoral services teams.

This incredibly busy period has come shortly after the successful transition to IER. Bringing registering to vote into the 21st century; IER allows each

individual to control and own their personal registration process, and ensures that the register is the most secure it has ever been.

The Register To Vote website has proved enormously popular since its launch in parallel with the introduction of IER. We continually see user satisfaction scores of over 90%, and of the more than 23 million applications submitted since the launch of IER in 2014, over three quarters have been made online.

Because of an unprecedented surge in demand at 10pm on 7 June, there was a serious issue with the website which led to our extending the window for applications by 48 hours. We recognise that, while this was overwhelmingly in the electorate's interest, it had a major and unwelcome impact on you and your teams. Thank you for working so hard despite this to ensure that all those who wanted to have their say in the EU Referendum could do so.

What is clear is that citizens want to register quickly and easily. Whilst we have made great strides towards this goal there is more we can do to modernise the current system. With your help that work is already in progress. I would like today to give you some examples of our modernising registration agenda and how this is transforming the experience of electors:

The Annual Canvass constitutes a fundamental part of the registration process, and we want to do all we can to make this process as effective and efficient as possible. We want to build on the successes of IER, and this means moving away from an old-fashioned, paper-based box-ticking system towards one that is modern and flexible meeting what we all expect from electoral registration.

That is why we supported pilots in three areas in 2016 (Birmingham, Ryedale and South Lakeland) and why we will be working with colleagues to trial changes in many more this year. The key aim of these pilots is to provide evidence that there are alternative ways of canvassing that are just as effective and more cost efficient compared with the current process.

We are already seeing some real positives emerge from the three 2016 pilots; resources better allocated, less paper being used, canvassing costs reduced, and time saved.

We saw Ryedale reducing postage by 50,000 envelopes and saving almost £40,000 compared with the 2015 canvass.

Late last year I visited the Electoral Services Team at Birmingham City Council who reduced their canvassing costs by £160,000 compared to the year before. I agree with their assumption that they will be able to learn lessons from the 2016 pilot and refine their processes even further – which again has the potential to lead to additional savings. Over these three pilots alone, we are looking at a reduction of canvassing costs of well over £200,000. This year our ambition is even greater, running pilots with even more local authorities and testing more approaches to change.

We expect these pilots to play a defining role in securing the significant

changes that we all want to make to the canvass. If successful, they will provide the evidence required to support permanent changes to the canvass in this Parliament aimed at saving at least £20 million from the cost of electoral registration year on year and providing all EROs with greater discretion to canvass in more cost effective ways according to local circumstances, rather than being bound by the current prescribed process.

We are also looking at the issue of duplicate applications and recognise that this is a significant issue for you. We obviously agree with the underlying principle that reducing the number of duplicate applications would be beneficial for both electors and administrators. The first step here is to understand the nature and impact of duplicate applications and to then explore a range of options to ascertain which are viable and appropriate relative to the scale of the problem.

I was pleased to hear that Democracy Club, working with the Electoral Commission, will be strengthening their work to provide direct polling station and candidate information to the public online, where we know they expect to find it. Over time, I believe that making this information available centrally will become an invaluable service for citizens, and will also cut back significantly on queries directed to local authorities at already busy times. I would strongly encourage EROs to provide Democracy Club with timely and accurate information for each poll, to enable this to happen.

Implementation of these initiatives is no small task, but I believe that solutions lie in partnerships between central government and local authorities; civil society groups and the private sector; public bodies and the wider electoral community. We must continue to work in concert to provide the best ideas and solutions we possibly can.

For me, inclusion is a central issue in creating a democracy that works for everyone. Over the last few months I have heard first hand from more than 100 organisations and individuals on a tour that will eventually have visited every country and region of the United Kingdom. I have been hugely impressed by the commitment of the people I have met who are working to ensure that all those who are eligible, whatever their background or circumstances, are on the electoral roll. There is a desire to understand the barriers and identify how we can help to dismantle them.

People from black and minority ethnic groups, those who move house frequently, young people, and those with a longstanding mental health condition or disability are still less likely to register to vote. Getting the full picture is essential if we are to understand the factors that influence registering to vote.

For example, we know that registration of students in tertiary education has always represented a major challenge for the electoral community. Historically they have been under-represented on the electoral roll and many voiced concerns that the end of block registration would exacerbate this challenge. The latest study, published in October 2015 by the Higher Education Policy Institute, showed that the worst predictions regarding the impact of IER were not realised: many applied to register online ahead of the

2015 General Election with more students choosing to vote in their home constituency rather than their place of study but still engaging in the polls. Nevertheless the government is committed to doing more to boost student participation and is working with further and higher education sector partners to identify approaches that really work.

I recognise the importance of understanding the issues that are preventing different under-registered groups to engage in the democratic process. That's why when I recently visited Long Road Sixth Form College in Cambridge, I was pleased to hear some of the ideas students had to encourage voter registration within their college and among their peers who may be indifferent or disengaged with our democracy.

Furthermore, the government part-funded the University of Sheffield to integrate electoral registration within the process of student enrolment. An indicative assessment shows this project had successful outcomes. For example, in the 2015/2016 academic year, the university had 76% of eligible students registered to vote compared with figures as low as 13% for similar sized universities.

We plan to evaluate the system implemented by the University of Sheffield, before writing out to all Further and Higher Education institutions to share the outcomes and encourage them to consider how best to emulate this and other approaches. The 'Sheffield' model may not be the best fit for every institution: for example where students are not resident in the same local authority area as the university – such as in London. And careful thought has to be given to the supply of information between the university and the Electoral Registration Officer. But it has proved that barriers can be broken down and impactful cost saving solutions tailored to address the issues faced by particular groups.

In addition, I am working together with Women's Aid and other domestic abuse organisations to review anonymous registration and ensure it works for those who need it most.

Our aim is to ensure survivors of domestic abuse can participate in our democracy. We are committed to removing barriers that prevent voters from exercising their democratic rights. Protecting the safety of survivors of abuse by making it easier for them to register to vote without their names and addresses appearing in the electoral register is a key part of that change.

Over the last few months I have worked closely with domestic abuse organisations to review the anonymous registration process. I have met with survivors of abuse who have been unable to register to vote anonymously – and therefore securely – because the information they need to provide is simply too complex, or they do not have access to the people who could attest about risks to their safety. It is clear to me that these difficulties in navigating the system may have led those affected by them to decide that the easiest thing to do was simply not to register to vote.

This government will not allow this to continue. Those who have been

constrained by their abusers must have full freedom to express themselves in the democratic processes and political life of our nation.

Whether it is by facilitating access for survivors of domestic abuse; changing the way in which we engage people through the canvass; or improving processes so that groups such as students are better represented, the goal is the same: developing a democracy that works for everyone, where every voice matters.

I have seen for myself that there are many places where impressive work is underway. It is these examples of good practice which make an impact that we want other local authorities to benefit from and emulate in ways that are tailored to them. It is also only right that the AEA, you, its members, work with the EC champion to embed this in your day to day work. I am pleased to hear that so many of you are already embracing this principle, sharing innovative ways of working and hope it is sustained over the year ahead and beyond.

A secure and clear democracy

I turn now to the final pillar: a secure and clear democracy.

At the end of last year, the government published its response to 'Securing the Ballot,' the review of electoral fraud completed by Sir Eric Pickles in August 2016, and I was pleased to be able to respond positively to the majority of Sir Eric's recommendations.

That report was important in highlighting the issue we face – whether encapsulated in actual cases or in the perception of the public. The government's view is that electoral fraud is unacceptable on any level and so is a perception that the electoral system is unreliable. The response addresses each of Sir Eric's recommendations in turn, and in doing so brings forward a holistic package of changes for tackling fraudulent activity at UK elections. This will ensure that, in partnership with the AEA and other key organisations, we can provide a clear and secure democracy.

The government is keen to take action to address the risk posed by the potential for fraudsters to commit personation and other electoral offences at polling stations.

The report outlines our intention to run a number of pilot schemes at local government elections in 2018 to test the impact on the conduct of elections of asking voters to present identification before voting. Once the detail of the pilots has been fully worked through with key partners, including the AEA, the Electoral Commission, and others, the government will invite applications from those local authorities who wish to take part.

If the pilots are successful, the government may look to introduce a voter identification system at other UK polls. We recognise that we will need to work with colleagues across the UK and especially in the devolved administrations on this area.

The government will also look to bring forward provisions to protect voters from undue influence and intimidation, where this occurs at the polling station; we will look to end the concerning practice of postal vote harvesting by campaigners and activists; and we will be exploring legislative opportunities to strengthen offences, penalties, and the legal challenge process.

We recognise this will be a challenging package of work, and we are keen to be inclusive both in working through the details of the reforms, and in bringing them forward effectively.

Let me now acknowledge what is doubtless playing on all of your minds on a regular basis: the issues that you face for the scheduled polls in May 2020. This is something we are keen to understand fully and, together with the Electoral Commission, to support you. Senior officials have recently met with John Turner, the Electoral Commission and a number of electoral administrators to commence an important piece of work to identify the risks and issues that 2020 poses.

This is important work that we need to take forward in partnership with you, the AEA, SOLACE, the Electoral Commission and other organisations to ensure we understand the full scope of the challenges and how we can collectively address them. This work has started now because we recognise that 2020 is not that far away in real terms and there are other events and challenges, which need to be considered and addressed as part of the path to successfully delivering the polls in May 2020.

With that in mind, we will continue to work with the Law Commission on how best to implement the recommendations of their review of electoral law.

Due to the unprecedented demand on parliamentary time there will not be capacity for a discrete electoral bill to take forward those proposals which require primary legislation in the near future. We will, however, continue to explore options for implementing reforms not requiring primary legislation. Where primary legislation is required, I am working on clauses that can be introduced through other means.

Turning briefly to the funding of national polls. The government has a duty to provide Returning Officers – and by extension electoral administrators – with the resources necessary to conduct nationwide elections effectively, and we will continue to do so. But it is critical that this funding is used as efficiently as possible, in the same way that value for money sits at the heart of local authority expenditure. I know you share this goal.

To this end I want to work with you to improve the sharing of best practice, so that we benefit from each other's knowledge and experience and are able to identify and embed greater efficiencies across our electoral system. This depends in part on better transparency, and we have already taken the first steps by publishing in December the data on the costs of the 2014 European Parliamentary elections.

We also plan to examine what we could do differently to enhance cost

effectiveness further, and to review how to make the overall funding and accounting process simpler.

Limitations on resources and the number of impending polls make this a challenging time for administrators. However, the importance of the effective delivery of our elections to the integrity and effectiveness of our democracy is paramount.

With concerted efforts on all our parts, I'm sure that the electoral community has the ability to overcome these obstacles. We must work together to ensure we can meet the challenges facing us. Having several times referred to the amount of work we need to take forward together, I want, finally, to announce today that I will be holding an annual summit on elections and registration issues, with the first one taking place this summer. We are working with John Turner and other partners, across the country, on the details.

I want the summit to provide an opportunity for you to tell me directly every year how our changes are working out for you, what more you need government to do to help you and what the barriers are to citizens engaging in our democracy. Through this summit and through all our wider collaboration I know we can, together, deliver an effective democracy that works for everyone.