

Are Regional Electoral Management Boards the way forward?

How might these work in reality? What happens next with Performance Standards?

Find out what the Electoral Commission have in store for us.

Jenny Watson speech to AEA Annual conference

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Introduction

Thank you for your introduction and for inviting me to speak at this year's conference.

It's nice to see some familiar faces from the conference in Gateshead back in September. Back then I talked about the political climate; about trust – or lack of it – in politics; and how the June elections had been managed. And of course we discussed the challenges and opportunities that this poses for us in the run up to the General Election, and beyond.

It's hard to say if the climate is showing signs of improvement in recent months. But one thing has moved on. We're now just a matter of weeks away from what many expect to be the closest General Election in 20 years being called.

So I'm glad of the chance to talk to you today about the immediate challenges facing us in the run up to May....or June....or even before then....

And then I'd like to say a few words about the longer-term challenges that I hope we'll be able to move forward on, together, after the election.

Electoral registers

Our first task is electoral registration. We've got one last chance to make sure everyone who wants to vote in 2010, can do so.

Back in April last year we published our first evaluation of performance standards for Electoral Registration Officers.

More than 8 out of 10 either met or exceeded the standard to keep electoral registers complete and accurate.

We'll be publishing the next set of figures in a few weeks, alongside some new research on electoral registration. But even without knowing the detailed results of that research, I can tell you that we are still facing a real challenge on registration, particularly in certain types of local authorities.

There are still significant numbers of people not on the register: our last estimate for England and Wales showed there were about 3.5 million missing. It's worth saying that a registration rate of around 91-92% compares reasonably with fairly recent international comparisons, which suggest no country operating a comparable system had a rate higher than 95%. But that's no reason for us to be complacent.

Across the UK, registration rates are lowest among groups I'm sure you're all familiar with: young people, people in the armed forces, home movers, people living in private rented accommodation, and some minority ethnic groups.

In any election, a large number of eligible people not registered is bad news - and we need to do everything we can to get our registers as complete as possible before the General Election.

In these last few weeks and months we all need to re-double our efforts. I would urge Electoral Registration Officers to use all the resources of your local authority to reinforce the message to voters that they need to be registered.

There are lots of ways to do this. Many of you will already have done them, or will be planning them. They include:

- Using council records to check for those not on the register, and target them
- And getting the message across in publications and freesheets, on your council website, on outdoor advertising, by putting up posters in swimming pools and libraries.

For our part, the Commission will be mailing hundreds of thousands of people who've recently moved home, to make sure they don't miss out on their chance to vote. We're working with the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of Justice to do everything we can to make it easier for people serving in Afghanistan to register and vote. And we'll be running a major TV, radio and online advertising campaign as a last push to get people registered.

The last thing anyone wants to be doing is turning people away at the polling station because they aren't registered, or because their details are wrong.

For the first time, we will be asking Returning Officers to record the number of people who are turned away at polling stations, or complain in the immediate run-up to the election that they are not registered. This is important information that will give us a better understanding of how well the registration process works.

And on a related point, we're seeing more interest in registration at national level from local authority politicians, who have asked through the LGA to be briefed on the results of the Commission's evaluation of how each local authority is doing against our performance standards. This issue is growing in political importance.

Reassuring voters on security

Another way we can get voters to the polls, particularly in a climate of mistrust, is to do everything we can to give them confidence that their vote is secure.

Now, the evidence suggests that fraud is relatively rare.

We've just published our report on the 2009 elections, confirming that last year's polls saw just 48 cases of alleged malpractice, in elections where more than 22 million votes were cast. One of those cases resulted in a prosecution and one in a police caution - a

further 17 were still under investigation by the police, or awaiting advice from the Crown Prosecution Service.

So - fraud remains uncommon.

But one case is one too many, and there's no room for complacency, particularly at a General Election.

Because when the stakes are higher, so are the risks:

- With more contests – 650 seats in all being fought
- And closer winning margins, providing greater incentives for fraud for those who want to break the rules
- And alongside the General Election – either on the same day or not long before or after - we'll also have 32 London borough elections some with contests for a Mayor, 36 Metropolitan districts, 78 Shire districts and 20 unitaries. That's a big job in itself, with its own set of risks.

And when risks are higher, so is media interest. There will be a big spotlight on security at the General Election – on a totally different scale to the elections last year.

So we need to reassure voters that we're all doing our bit to tackle it.

There are lots of things you can do, if you haven't already:

- Like regional events for police and Returning Officers. I know many of you have already held successful events. But for those of you in areas where they're due in the next few weeks, I'm urging you to attend.
- Like making sure you know who your 'Single Point of Contact' is in your local police force for dealing with electoral fraud; that you've assessed the risk together, and have robust plans in place to respond to that risk assessment.
- Like speaking to the parties and candidates in your area so you know they know the rules.

Because, even if your constituency has a clean bill of health when it comes to fraud, don't assume it won't happen to you this time.

That's why we've asked political parties to help by ensuring their workers and volunteers follow the Commission's guidance. For example, not completing ballot papers for voters; and avoiding handling completed ballot papers unless there's no alternative.

Because if we want voters to have confidence in politics, they need to have confidence in the poll, and in the result.

General election challenges

Another task is to make sure we're ready for the particular challenges posed by a General Election.

I've already mentioned some of these – there may be more candidates, and there will certainly be a greater media spotlight. Which I'm sure many of you will have experienced in 2005, or before.

But that doesn't mean it's a case of repeating what happened last time.

This year we've got a whole new set of issues to contend with.

There are new constituency boundaries in England and Wales.

This will be the first General Election with postal vote absent voter identifiers and of course they will need to be checked across local authority boundaries in England for the first time. Our position hasn't changed - we'd like to see every postal ballot checked. The vast majority of Returning Officers have been checking identifiers on all returned postal vote identifiers, and we believe 100 per cent checking should now be made mandatory. The funding made available for this year's General Election is very welcome and it's important this is provided consistently in future.

From the number of MPs standing down, we know that for a lot of candidates, this will be their first General Election. We can't say for certain at this stage, but a lot of agents are likely to be in the same position, and there may well be a higher number of independent candidates.

In 2009 we registered more than 60 new political parties. That's double the number in 2008.

For many, this will be their first election, and they may not know the rules.

But, even for those who have stood before, there are new rules on party and election finance - including a new additional regulated period covering "pre-candidacy" spending by individuals, which started on the 1st of January.

We've published guidance for candidates and agents on this and all the other changes.

Please do all you can to make sure the candidates and agents in your area know about this guidance.

Of course we won't know who all the new candidates are until the registration deadline, but we're making sure we get the message out as widely possible about where they can get guidance from.

Returning Officers will often be the first point of enquiry for someone considering standing, so please take every opportunity to point out that there are rules and that we provide plenty of guidance to help them decide whether or not to put themselves forward.

With higher than usual levels of press and public scrutiny, we know that voters' confidence will be damaged further if they don't think the rules are being followed.

Then, there's time pressure.

With local elections we operate within the 25 working days timetable, and the date is fixed in advance.

The minimum general election timetable is 17 working days, although of course we had a month's notice of the last two general elections, and just over 6 weeks in 1997.

Now I'm sure there are those who see a short campaign as welcome relief. But it does have a downside. For all of those involved – everyone here, candidates, political parties, and voters – it also means we have only limited time to make sure everyone can play their part.

Finally, we can also expect a much higher turnout than last June.

It was 61 per cent in 2005, almost double the 34 per cent at the European elections.

It's difficult to predict how voters will respond to the events of the last twelve months. Despite recent statistics suggesting that the public sense of voting as a civic duty is in decline, there's still every possibility that turnout may be as high or higher than the last General Election. And it will certainly be higher than the other elections you have run in the last five years.

The count

Which brings me to the count - another area that is going to be under increased scrutiny this year.

I'm sure you have been part of the debate in the media and amongst politicians about whether or not the drama of election night will be lost if more of you count the day after polling.

We've made our position clear: the most important thing is that the count is accurate, and that voters have confidence in the election result.

We all enjoy the excitement - or hard work - of election night, but Returning Officers have a responsibility to make sure the results are accurate and accepted.

It is entirely appropriate for Returning Officers to decide to hold the count the next day - if they are clear that this is necessary to ensure an accurate result.

But you need to be sure you can explain why you've taken that judgement and be able to demonstrate your count is well run. And of course, be prepared to explain the arrangements for keeping the ballot boxes absolutely secure at all times. There may not be a lot of sympathy for a count that declares the next day and doesn't appear to be run efficiently.

After the election

So, whether the election is May - or June - or sooner - that's a lot of work, for all of us, in the months ahead.

And, while I'm sure we will all breathe a small sigh once the result is called, the simple fact is that it doesn't stop there.

Amid all the post-election work that goes on up and down the country, at the Commission we'll be producing our report on the elections, looking at what went right, what went wrong, and what we can do to make it better next time.

And we want to use that report to return to some fundamental questions about the way elections are run. Questions that I hope will be picked up by the new Parliament.

We've said for some time that we're trying to run 21st century elections with 19th century structures

How can a system designed at a time when the vast majority of the population didn't have the right to vote, work in an era when we hope for mass participation?

And that's before we add in recent changes like postal voting on demand.

And more frequent elections, with different voting systems in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland and London.

This can't continue. That's why we published our report on *Electoral Administration in the UK* in 2008, which made recommendations to improve the co-ordination, leadership and support provided for elections.

There has already been some progress, as we set out when we reported on last year's elections. The electoral management board in Scotland in particular has proved successful, and provides a useful model to build on.

This will be the first General Election since then, and we'll use it as a chance to review where we are..

The running of elections remains fundamentally decentralised - and it may be that we need to return to questions like: whether there should be a central or regional power of direction, if the system proves incapable of bearing up under the strains placed on it.

So it was very interesting to hear what Michael Wills said last week about how he thought co-ordination of elections and registration might be improved through the creation of a National Elections Service.

As I said before, strong leadership, improved co-ordination and better support for elections are all things we support and I can see how a central body with a power of direction might help achieve this.

But there are, of course, a range of other ways to do that without creating an elections service similar to those in Canada and Australia. And maintaining a strong local element in the delivery of elections will always remain important.

So as the Minister rightly acknowledged this is a complex issue and not one where I'm going to rush to say what we think the answer is. He is right to raise these questions – and I hope whoever follows in his footsteps in the next government – of whatever political complexion – will start off by thinking about the big picture. The Commission will be saying more about this in the future and I hope you will share your views with us as our thinking develops.

And as we do this other changes we've called for in the past still remain outstanding. We're waiting for the Government to set out a clear plan for electoral modernisation, and we've written to the political parties outlining what principles we think should inform this. There are some concrete changes we've identified that would benefit voters, including advance voting and our 'making your mark' proposals - to make voting materials easier for voters to understand.

Electoral law remains complex and still needs simplification and consolidation.

And it looks more and more likely that there will be a referendum before long – UK-wide, in Wales or in Scotland. Alongside our preparations for the 2010 elections, we're preparing what it would take to run a referendum, with a more centralised set of structures than we're used to at regular elections.

As ever, your feedback on what went well, and what didn't at this year's elections - in the run-up, on polling day, and at the count - will be invaluable in helping us put together our election report. But please also take the chance to say if you think there are more fundamental things that need to change, beyond the simple mechanics of running the election.

We'll always work in partnership to achieve change, and are open to different ways of achieving the outcome we want to see.

But change can't be avoided or postponed.

And, as I said, I hope, and believe, that the new Parliament, whatever colour, will agree, and will listen and act on what we have to say.

Individual registration

There's no doubt that it can be done. For example, the Commission had long lobbied for Individual Registration, and so had many of you.

We made it clear that registration by household was brought in in a different era - and it belongs in a different era.

So the Political Parties and Elections Act last year was a massive milestone passed.

We recognise that it's big job to change the way that people register to vote – in effect, we're asking every voter in Great Britain to re-register themselves using personal identifiers - and any change must start from the voters' point of view.

That's why we want to see sufficient time and funding made available to support you as you prepare.

The Government have recently announced they won't be asking you to begin the first collection of personal identifiers in the canvass immediately following the General Election.

It's not clear yet when the first round of collection will be. But that's not really the main issue at present - there's plenty to be done sorting answers out to some important questions, including the handling of data and how to develop forms that make life easy for people, not difficult. It will take time to update software systems too.

So we're confident that the delay in beginning the voluntary phase can be used to get other parts of the plan in place.

We've already started to see the first hostile press reports about this change. We have to persuade – not tell – people what's behind it.

Parliament has also given the Commission a vital role in producing annual “state of the register” reports annually – the first is expected in 2011 - up to an assessment in 2015 of whether or not the compulsory phase should begin.

During this time, we'll continue to act as a “critical friend”. If we have concerns that there isn't the clarity about how to move forward, we won't hesitate to say so.

So – it's another challenge for all of us. But if we do it right, by 2015 we will have a register that is more comprehensive, accurate and secure.

One that reflects the way voters live. One that puts voters first.

Conclusion

Because elections are about voters.

Not just the work in the run-up to the general election:

- Getting people registered
- Giving people confidence their votes are safe
- And getting ready for the particular challenges we know the election will throw up.

But also the longer-term questions:

- Reassessing the way elections are run
- Reforming electoral law
- Reshaping an electoral system around what voters want and need
- And rekindling trust in politics.

Because this election – any election – isn't just about the politicians, or the parties.

And it's certainly not about us.

It's about those people who make their mark on a piece of paper.

Let's make sure nothing gets in their way.

Thank You.

(ends)