

Funding the Future

The government is seeking to undermine the Electoral Co...

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This extraordinary mail has been sent by all but one the [Electoral Commissioners](#) to the government today (I added the highlight in the main body of the text):

Date: 21 February 2022

To:

The Rt Hon Michael Gove MP - Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Communities and Housing

The Rt Hon Kemi Badenoch MP - Minister for Levelling Up Communities

The Rt Hon Lord True CBE - Minister of State, the Cabinet Office

From:

John Pullinger – Chair and Electoral Commissioner

Sarah Chambers - Electoral Commissioner

Rob Vincent - Electoral Commissioner

Dame Sue Bruce - Electoral Commissioner (Scotland)

Professor Dame Elan Closs Stephens - Electoral Commissioner (Wales)

Dr Katy Radford - Electoral Commissioner (Northern Ireland)

Alex Attwood - Electoral Commissioner (nominated by the smaller parties)

Alasdair Morgan - Electoral Commissioner (nominated by the Scottish National Party)

Joan Walley - Electoral Commissioner (nominated by the Labour Party)

Format: Sent by email

Dear Ministers,

As the Elections Bill enters its Lords stages, we write to you to urge the Government to reconsider those measures which seek to change the oversight arrangements of the Electoral Commission. Our aim, which we anticipate you share, is to maintain the Commission's current independence and its accountability to all parties elected to the parliaments of the United Kingdom. Reflecting the significance of this matter, this letter is signed collectively from the full board of the Commission, save for Lord Gilbert of Panteg (our Conservative nominated Commissioner) because the House of Lords where he sits is now considering this legislation.

It is our firm and shared view that the introduction of a Strategy and Policy Statement – enabling the Government to guide the work of the Commission – is inconsistent with the role that an independent electoral commission plays in a healthy democracy. This independence is fundamental to maintaining confidence and legitimacy in our electoral system.

If made law, these provisions will enable a government in the future to influence the Commission's operational functions and decision-making. This includes its oversight and enforcement of the political finance regime, but also the advice and guidance it provides to electoral administrators, parties and campaigners, and its work on voter registration. The Statement would place a duty on the Commission to have regard to the government's strategic and policy priorities and to help the government to meet those priorities. The Statement would also place a duty on the Commission to have regard to guidance issued by the Government relating to any of its functions. It would thereby provide a mechanism, driven by the then governing party, enabling that party's ministers to shape how electoral law is applied to them and their political competitors. While the stated position of the current government is that it would not intend to use these powers to impact on the Commission's independent oversight and regulation of the electoral system, no such assurances can be given about how the broad scope of these powers would be used over time.

The Statement has no precedent in the accountability arrangements of electoral commissions in other comparable democracies, such as Canada, Australia or New Zealand. Indeed, the Code of Good Practice in Electoral Matters of the Commission, of which the UK is a member, states that "Only transparency, impartiality and independence from political motivated manipulation will ensure proper administration of the election process".

The Commission's accountability is direct to the UK's parliaments and should remain so, rather

I do not think we could get a clearer statement than that the Commission thinks that the government is intent on undermining representative democracy in the UK.

We have been warned.