

# Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission

## Oral evidence: Preferred candidate for Chair of the Electoral Commission

Monday 1 March 2021

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Members present: Mr Speaker (Chair); Luke Hall; Craig Mackinlay; Christian Matheson; Karl McCartney; Cat Smith; Owen Thompson; Mr William Wragg.

Questions 1-28

Witness

John Pullinger CB, proposed candidate for chair of the Electoral Commission.



## Examination of witness

Witness: John Pullinger.

Q1 **Chair:** I welcome John Pullinger, who is before us today as candidate for the post of chair of the Electoral Commission. John, we are going to ask you a few questions about your experience, your vision for the Electoral Commission, and your personal independence. I will start off the questions. Is that all right with you, John?

**John Pullinger:** That's absolutely fine.

**Chair:** Marvellous. Thanks for taking the time to be here. Let me ask you a straightforward question: why do you want to be the chair of the Electoral Commission? Is it the money? Is it the job?

**John Pullinger:** When I am thinking about jobs to take on, I think, first of all, "Is it worthwhile?" Secondly, I think, "Have I got something to offer?" Thirdly, I think, "Have I got the time to do it justice?"

Is it worthwhile? Democracy clearly is a worthwhile thing and, as you and the team said in the job advert, this is something that matters to democracy—this role is important—so that's a strong motivator.

Have I got something to offer? Throughout this recruitment process, which has been quite thorough, three things have been said to me about what I might have to offer this role. First, I have a track record of independence in quite political environments. Secondly, I'm a good listener, and I'm good at getting on the wavelength of a variety of people. Thirdly, I've successfully delivered strategies for change in several different organisations.

Have I got the time? Well, I'm just finishing a two-year appointment, so that will free up enough time for this job. So I am confident that I'll be able to devote the necessary time to do it properly.

**Chair:** Thanks for that, John. I should say that I do know John from when he worked in the House, and I am personally pleased that he has applied for the role, but others will decide following his answers.

Q2 **Luke Hall:** Good morning, Mr Pullinger. Thank you for coming today. Could you outline your experience of leading change within an organisation and how you would use that experience and skillset as chair of the Electoral Commission?

**John Pullinger:** I'll use the example of when I took up the post of National Statistician in 2014. I arrived at a time when the organisation was under quite a lot of criticism. Mr Wragg's Committee had done a series of quite critical inquiries into the work of the office. The incoming Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, had gone to the Treasury Committee and said that the numbers weren't as good as he was used to from Canada. I know very clearly when I arrived, from the Chancellor in



particular, that he wanted better if he was going to make tough decisions about the economy.

When I arrived in the job, I had on my desk a review by a senior economist of what was going wrong. She said that the organisation was lacking curiosity. What I took that to mean was that they were focused on the technical aspects of doing the job and on following a rulebook to get the statistics that met the technical quality standards. They were looking at the what, but they weren't looking at the why. The key element of the strategy was to focus on the why. Why are we doing these statistics? It is not to make them technically great; it's to get the statistics that help the country make better decisions.

I started off by talking to Ministers, to the Governor of the Bank of England and to others who were trying to make decisions and needed good numbers on the economy. They told me that they needed us to be much quicker. They weren't much interested in the aggregates; they wanted to get under the skin of it to look at the detail. Most of all, they wanted things to be relevant. Over a five-year period, we focused on those three things.

First up, things like GDP we do monthly rather than quarterly, and we have a lot of realtime data, which has been particularly useful during the pandemic. On the detail, we were doing this during the period of the Brexit discussions, and we had a real focus on trade data and dramatically increasing the range of data on trade available to people negotiating trade agreements. On relevance, it wasn't just about, "What is the total size of the economy?" but, "Are we innovating? What is happening to jobs? What is the digital economy doing in terms of hollowing out retail or changing other sectors?" We focused on producing information that is useful to people, rather than informative that is qualitative.

Step by step by step, I think we have achieved that pretty well. There are always challenges, and anyone in the public eye gets criticism, but I think there is a direct read-across to the Electoral Commission role: to really get the system focused on the people using it, rather than thinking very strongly about compliance with a particular rulebook.

**Chair:** Luke, are you happy with that?

**Luke Hall:** Thank you. That was very useful.

Q3 **Christian Matheson:** Good morning, Mr Pullinger. I have a couple of questions about your experience in leading organisations. You are an experienced chief executive, and you have just told us about some of your experience, but you've limited experience as a non-executive chair. In what ways would you need to adapt your approach?

**John Pullinger:** As a chief executive, I'm used to taking responsibility for making things happen, rolling my sleeves up, and getting things to work, working closely with a team to get change to happen, holding people to their promises, and making a system better day by day by day—very much on performance.



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As a chair, I hope I will keep my natural determination to make change happen, but see the role primarily about supporting others in making the change happen, working with the chief executive and their team to support them and ensure that they have the resources to do the job. I do not mean money here particularly, but support from other stakeholders and having internal systems that really work, helping them make the job right, but holding them accountable on whether they do.

I think a key difference with a non-executive role is that you've a different support network. You've got your fellow non-executive board members. In terms of the difference, the key thing for me would be working with the other commissioners so that we function as a team. In this particular role, the commission is set up in a very clever way, I think, because you have representatives of the parties, representatives from each part of the Union, as well as people who are representing the commission as a whole. Bringing them together as a team will be a key difference for me, and in that way I hope we'll be able to help the commission do its job and then, in turn, hold people accountable for doing it well.

**Q4 Christian Matheson:** So we've got teamwork in terms of your work with the fellow commissioners, but what else would you do? How else would you approach the role in order to get the best out of those commissioners?

**John Pullinger:** They all have skills, and this is about using them to reach the communities that they represent. The devolved institution set-up is changing quite quickly, and it is going to help me a lot to have people who come from that environment and who can introduce me to it and help the commission as a whole understand it. It is similar with the party reps. We also have one of them who is a former local authority chief executive. I will be trying to use the skills that they have for the benefit of the whole group, helping us to make connections with different stakeholders that really matter to the success of the commission as a whole.

**Q5 Christian Matheson:** You touched on this in the first part of your answer, but one of the fundamental building blocks for success is the relationship between the chair and the chief executive. What makes for an optimised relationship there?

**John Pullinger:** The key thing is alignment: we both want the same things, but we deliver those things through a different set of activities and skills. We need to be on the same page. I will need to work hard with him to get a really good relationship, so that we have confidence in each other and have a common view about what good looks like, so that we are not surprising each other with what we are doing. That idea of alignment is the key thing.

**Q6 Mr Wragg:** Good morning, Mr Pullinger. How would you go about ensuring that the Electoral Commission understands and responds to the needs of voters?

**John Pullinger:** Clearly, this is all about the voters, which means trying to find mechanisms to connect with people. The critical thing for me there



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is to understand that all politics is local. People are living in very different communities up and down the country, and I would expect to get out of London quite a lot, and I would expect the commission's mindset to be thinking about what it is like for individual voters, what motivates them to vote, how do they get information about how to vote, and making sure that they have every opportunity to do so. That means looking at all aspects of the commission's work through the lens of voters, particularly those who may be disinclined to vote at the moment, and helping them to understand the value of voting and encouraging them to actually take the steps that enable them to cast their vote in the proper way.

**Q7 Mr Wragg:** Thank you very much. What would you do as the chair of the Electoral Commission to ensure that it has a positive relationship with those stakeholders—voters being first and foremost, but other stakeholders as well?

**John Pullinger:** Apart from voters, who are top of the pyramid, you have three other types of stakeholder. The first are what I would describe as being on the frontline of elections: the candidates, campaigners, parties, but also the electoral administrators who are going through the actual business on the ground and making the thing successful. This is about finding ways to signal to the rest of organisation, by doing things myself, that it is an important thing to do to get to know what it is like to campaign, to run an election, to be at the count. We need to see how things happen. The practical business of frontline people in electoral business is my first level.

The second level is the people who are involved in what I would describe as the electoral system. The Government is obviously part of that, but so is law enforcement: the police, the CPS and various other organisations, such as the Information Commissioner. I would also put in this box the media, academics and other people who are players in the electoral system. I sense there is a fragmentation there at the moment, and we need to consider how to get that group to function as a system, rather than individual elements. I think a key part of my role would be to be an advocate for the whole system, rather than just for the Electoral Commission.

The third level of stakeholders is the people who are holding the whole system accountable, and that is the Parliaments of the UK. I would need to spend time with not only you as a Committee and particularly with your Committee, Mr Wragg, looking at constitutional affairs, but also the Committee on Standards and similar counterparts in Scotland and Wales. I would also want to keep the connection to Northern Ireland. We need to understand the process of scrutiny and give you every help possible in making that scrutiny work.

**Q8 Mr Wragg:** Thank you very much for that. With regard to one of the stakeholder groups that you gave as an example, what experience do you have of handling or working with a scrutinising—if not perhaps hostile—press?



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**John Pullinger:** ONS numbers were frequently in the news, and some of the things that we were doing were challenged. I would often personally be the subject of some of those challenges. Typically, what I would do is talk to the editor or the journalist and have a relationship with them, particularly those who were most challenging, and I will give you a specific example.

The Mail group was very challenging about some of the numbers were doing quite early in my time, so I spoke to the Mail, and they said, "Well, how about doing a feature on the role of the ONS?" and they did something in *The Mail on Sunday* that talked through just what it was like to be the National Statistician trying to juggle all these things. To try to do this sort of discussion in the news element of the paper would be tricky, because the news environment is very tough, but to build a relationship with readers of *The Daily Mail* by having a feature was a good way of having a softer relationship. We need to be positive about the media. The media are part of getting your message across, so understand where they are coming from and talk to them.

Q9 **Mr Wragg:** What does impartiality mean to you?

**John Pullinger:** I've had a career in which I've needed to be impartial in pretty much all the roles I've had. It's about trustworthiness with different parties. In the '80s I was working with Mr Hall's predecessors, often in the role of go-between between the Government and local authorities on local government reform. In the '90s, I was chairing committees between employers and employee groups to set pay. In the 2000s, I was working as House of Commons Librarian, serving Members of all parties impartially and giving everybody the same amount of attention and respect. Finally, in this role of National Statistician, you are trying to produce an evidence base that everyone is going to accept and use without question. Even though the discussions they are going to be having will be very contested, let's make sure we don't contest the numbers. Impartiality means that you yourself are trusted and trustworthy. People can use what you do without questioning its validity.

Q10 **Mr Wragg:** Finally from me, on that theme of impartiality, how will you ensure that the Electoral Commission acts with impartiality?

**John Pullinger:** First of all, I should say that it is crucial that it does, and we need to set up processes that ensure that everything that is coming out from the commission demonstrates that impartiality. There is a particular challenge in the Electoral Commission's role, because we do have people who have come from political parties. That is absolutely right and proper, and very helpful because you've got experience in the room. But I would want to work through with the commissioners how we make that real, but still enable them to be honest to the parties that nominated them for the position.

Q11 **Cat Smith:** Good morning, Mr Pullinger. I ask my question perhaps with a degree of self-awareness that this Committee is perhaps not a great advert for it, but what are the main considerations for the Electoral



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Commission in terms of equality, diversity and inclusion?

**John Pullinger:** There are two things that matter to me here. The first is the whole idea of diversity of thought. An organisation is much stronger if it contains different viewpoints, perspectives and life experiences and encourages that difference when it's having its deliberations. Looking at the commission, I am not going to help in terms of ethnic balance or age balance. The interests of younger voters are quite different to the interests of older voters, particularly in the use of technology. The first thing is to try to find ways of getting different voices into the room that reflect the diversity of Britain today.

The second aspect is that we are the Electoral Commission working for voters, and if we do not look like and feel like and talk like the diversity of voters across the country, why should they feel we are the commission for them? There the trick is going to be to have good relationships with different community groups up and down the country.

During this interview process, I have talked to some of you about just how we might do that, but the key way of doing that is local, working with the grain of individual constituencies and the individual environments in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

- Q12 **Cat Smith:** On the topic of diversity within the United Kingdom, as a result of devolution the commission is obviously now accountable to the Scottish and Welsh Parliaments as well as to us in Westminster, so what advantages and challenges does that accountability framework create for the commission?

**John Pullinger:** I have been lucky in that my previous role as National Statistician had a similar set-up. I was the statistician for the UK, but I also had a reporting line into Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, so I am used to that set-up of politics. For me—it is true now—one of the interesting features was that the Governments of the countries were each of a different party, and working with people in government from different parties gives you a much richer understanding of just how different parties across the UK think.

There is also a different way of doing business in each of the countries, I think. First of all, there is a learning question there: you really need to understand that difference and work with it, rather than try to impose something uniform on it. There is a great benefit to that, because you can see what works—you can and test things that have happened in one country and see how they relate to another. For example, in Scotland and Wales there have been changes to the franchise; understanding how that goes in the coming elections, in May, will be a useful case study in thinking about whether there should be changes elsewhere—or not; I am not saying one way or another. There is a great natural experiment in terms of learning for us by thinking about the experience in each of the jurisdictions of the UK.

**Cat Smith:** Thank you, Mr Pullinger.



**Chair:** Anybody else? We will move on to Karl.

Q13 **Karl McCartney:** Good morning, Mr Pullinger, and congratulations on getting this far. At the end of your term, how will you judge whether you have been successful in post?

**John Pullinger:** I have thought very hard about that and come up with a simple but, I think, important formulation. It should be that the Electoral Commission should not be the subject of controversy and debate, and that when we have elections people are focused on the issues of the election, rather than the electoral process. The simplicity of that helps me. It helps to deal with any lingering concerns about the past, but it also helps our thinking about potential future threats to the system and making sure we are ahead of the game. If we want an electoral process in which the commission is not the subject of debate, we need to be ahead of all the future and emerging issues and to make sure they are dealt with, so that the electorate are focused on the issues, not the process.

Q14 **Karl McCartney:** Okay. Are there any other changes we should expect the commission to have made under your leadership?

**John Pullinger:** Well, in order to achieve that, there are three challenges you need to step up to. The first is just to keep the show on the road. The elections in May will be a bumper crop and they will be done against the backdrop of covid. There is a huge of work to support people in the frontline, whether they are candidates trying to get their message across, canvassers trying to canvass, or administrators trying to count. Keeping the show on the road is quite a big thing for the electoral process. The regulatory decisions the commission makes need to be sure-footed. We need to pick the right battles. We have talked about devolution, and I think there is a particular set of issues about keeping the show on the road in the devolved contexts.

Secondly, in the next four-year period, there is a big agenda of change. There are digital changes—technology is transforming the electoral landscape day by day. The commission needs to get a grip on that and get ahead of it, whether in its internal operations or in things like voter ID and digital imprints on campaigning literature. Technology needs to be understood and reckoned with. The second bit of change is internal change. We have talked about diversity, but I think about generally making the commission really businesslike in a changing environment. It is going to be tough. They need to be strong, professional, quick and innovative to make things happen.

Finally, in terms of change, there is the whole issue of change in the way that regulation is done so that the focus is on helping good people to do a good job, rather than being seen as primarily in the punishment business. We have to make sure the balance is right and there is a really clear message going across from there. To do that, the critical element is relationships—with parties and with all the different players in the system—and making sure they are much more fruitful, which ultimately means a better relationship with voters.



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So those are my three areas: keep the show on the road, make some change and develop really good relationships. Those are the three things you can expect from me over the next four years.

- Q15 **Karl McCartney:** I don't disagree with the last point of your three, but you are talking to a panel of which quite a few of us have been on the receiving end of the Electoral Commission, so my next question is quite pointed. What do you perceive has been the Electoral Commission's biggest mistake in recent years?

**John Pullinger:** I am in a fortunate position, in that the Electoral Commission has been subject to quite a lot of review. I am not going to duck the question, but I do want to see the outcome of Mr Wragg's Committee's review and the Committee on Standards in Public Life review, because I think that very forensic examination will really help me to understand what needs to happen next.

I have looked at the evidence submitted to those reviews. The first thing I would say is that a lot of that evidence is very complimentary about the commission—about the work it does, the importance of the work it does, and the quality and dedication of the staff—but some of it is not. There are four issues, and the fourth is the one I think is the most critical to your question.

The first one is proportionality: does the commission differentiate enough between really bad things and things that are just inadvertent mistakes? The second one is bureaucracy and timeliness—some things seem to take an inordinate length of time and to be very difficult to get through.

The third one is, is the commission actually helping people do a good job? There are a lot of volunteers in this business; there are a lot of people who are not really focused on trying to go through dotting the i's and crossing the t's, although that clearly needs to be done. They are focused on the business, and they inadvertently get tripped up and get into a very difficult situation that seems endless and difficult to get out of. That does need to change. That is quite a straightforward thing to say. How hard it will be to do, I don't know yet.

However, the critical aspect is the issue of accountability and understanding how the commission really is accountable. I think there are three elements to it. The first is what I would call horizontal accountability. Parliament has decided what the Electoral Commission should do, the Electoral Commission does it, and then the courts can challenge their decisions, if they need to be challenged. There have been some issues with that, but it is there, it is clear, and it is the same for the Electoral Commission as for anybody else.

The second aspect of accountability is scrutiny by Parliament—system accountability. That is the questioning by you today. We are doing it, Mr Wragg's Committee is doing it and others are doing it, and the electoral process is the subject of inquiry by parliamentarians in each of the Administrations of the UK, and particularly at Westminster.



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The third aspect is the most important, and it is actually what we are doing today. We have an Electoral Commission, and the staff and the executive of the Electoral Commission are responsible for delivering the work of the Electoral Commission that Parliament has entrusted to it. The non-executives on the Electoral Commission—the chair and that group of commissioners—are there to hold the executive accountable for what they are doing. I would want to make sure that that is really solid, really clear and really understood.

The final element—this is the crucial thing—is the appointment of the chair. The chair is appointed on a recommendation by you and by the House—the House decides. If you are confident, in this case, that I can do that job, you will hold me to those promises and, in four years' time, you will be able to decide to have a different chair. That is accountability in action, and very much in line with the Westminster process. So the key point is this point.

**Q16 Karl McCartney:** I have a couple more questions, but I am conscious that there are lots of other questions from my colleagues on the Committee, so could you give us shorter answers if possible?

My next question is, why do you think the Conservative party has a "major reform or abolish" stance with regard to the Electoral Commission?

**John Pullinger:** Straightforwardly, the Conservative party have not been happy with the way the Electoral Commission has done its job, and do not believe it is accountable to anyone for the failures they think have been made.

**Chair:** Can I just come in? Karl, we have to watch that we are not taking Owen's questions—these are down for Owen. I am happy for you to come in on the back of them, but it would be better if you did not lead on them.

**Q17 Karl McCartney:** Okay, I will move to my final question. I will just say that, in those last two answers, I was hoping that the word "impartiality" might crop up, after the discussion you had on William Wragg's questions.

My final question for you is, what will be your first priority on taking office?

**John Pullinger:** My first priority is to build the relationships—particularly, given the concerns the Conservative party have had, to begin the task of building that relationship.

**Karl McCartney:** Thank you very much. Back to you, Speaker.

**Chair:** Thanks, Karl. Owen, over to you. If you want to come back in, Karl, by all means do, but Owen must do his questions.

**Q18 Owen Thompson:** Thanks, Mr Speaker, and good morning, Mr Pullinger. You have touched a couple of times on the two ongoing inquiries. Why do you think there is currently so much attention to and interest in the work



of the commission?

**John Pullinger:** Over the last four years, there has been a lot of controversy about the work that the commission has done, and it is not just the Conservative party; there are others who want the system to work and who want to find ways to make it work. There is a long-standing concern about the legislation around elections, which is very complicated and very difficult to navigate, and people want to try to find a way to make the whole thing work better for all the parties, but particularly for those on the frontline who are struggling at the moment, with a lot of change happening and a system that is having difficulties adapting to the changes that are necessary. In that environment, it is absolutely right that Committees are looking for ways to scrutinise and for evidence as to how to make things better.

Q19 **Owen Thompson:** We have mentioned the evidence that has been submitted to the inquiries—it was touched on in Karl’s questions—but I am just wondering what else you might have learned from reading through that evidence.

**John Pullinger:** Probably the most straightforward thing is that it is complicated. There are a lot of different players in this space, and you have to navigate a way that is acceptable to all of them, in an environment where people are from very different perspectives. In terms of the whole basis of regulation, there are perfectly legitimate different viewpoints that different parties have about how regulation should operate. As a regulator, it is particularly challenging to navigate those kinds of things.

It is complicated, but the amount of interest just demonstrates how important it is. This is about making sure that the legitimacy of our electoral politics is understood and upheld, and finding a way to do that really does matter. The more support we can have from Committees and others in working out the best way of doing that, the better.

Q20 **Owen Thompson:** Karl mentioned the position of the Conservative party, and it is probably safe to say that we are coming at this from different angles. The Conservative party submission mooted the idea of the commission being abolished. Do you have any thoughts on why that was suggested? As the incoming chair, are you worried about that threat?

**John Pullinger:** As I said in one of my earlier answers, I would want to approach the role of chair in terms of thinking about what the best electoral system is that works for the politics of the UK at the moment and over the period ahead. I want to be open-minded to proposals for change, but I do observe that many other people submitting evidence to the inquiries are very keen for the Electoral Commission’s strength to be upheld or even increased. So navigating that is going to be tricky, but my criterion is, what is going to create the most robust electoral system for a period ahead that is going to be quite challenging in British politics?

**Owen Thompson:** Thank you.



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- Q21 **Christian Matheson:** You spent 10 years, Mr Pullinger, as House of Commons Librarian and then five years as National Statistician. Aren't you a bit of an establishment figure?

**John Pullinger:** Hopefully, I picked up some skills in those roles that will be relevant and helpful to me in this role. I would be concerned if I was perceived as remote from the people I will be in the job to serve, which is, fundamentally, the people on the frontline. I think what I would do is something similar to what I did when I came into the House of Commons Library. One of the first MPs I met gave me some super advice—it was Sylvia Heal, Mr Speaker, and she was Deputy Speaker at the time. She said, "The best way to demonstrate you are not remote is to spend some time with Members. Go to constituencies. Talk to people." To be fair to her, she invited me to her constituency; I had dinner with her in the evening, and we spent a Friday going round her constituency. I made it my policy to do that on a regular basis.

**Chair:** Who paid?

**John Pullinger:** My office in the House of Commons was at the back of the Chair—the room next door to where Mr Speaker is. My door was always open in my 10 years, and I would always encourage Members to come in and talk to me. That gave me a great insight and hopefully presented me as someone who understood the work of Members rather than as an establishment figure remote from them.

- Q22 **Christian Matheson:** From that time, or from some of your other roles in politics, what preconceptions of politicians did you get?

**John Pullinger:** What preconceptions did I get? The main thing I got was respect. I was House of Commons Librarian all the way through the expenses crisis. Some of the people who would come and sit in my chair were going through a very tough time—people inadvertently trapped in a very difficult situation and a system that was making them feel they weren't worthy. These were people who had gone through that process with a real spirit of public service, which I think is true for Members of all parties. Being inside the system, you understand that really well.

**Christian Matheson:** Thank you. Thank you, Mr Speaker.

- Q23 **Craig Mackinlay:** Welcome this morning, Mr Pullinger. I have a couple of points on time commitment—one personal, and one institutional. I don't think you have too many other roles at the moment. What about your time commitment—two days a week—to this institution, given that it has a large staff, an executive, a secretariat and many years of institutional experience? As you will be aware if you have scanned through the commission's website, there are many thousands of pages of interpretation on understanding its own view of the law, which has been proven sometimes right, sometimes wrong. Do you think the two days a week are sufficient, No. 1, for you personally and, No. 2, to be able to administer a large and complex organisation?



**John Pullinger:** The first thing to say is that I will devote as much time as is necessary to do the job properly. This will be my main role if I am successful, and I will devote myself to making it a success. But it is advertised as a non-executive role, and the issue is to really keep the balance we discussed earlier between the role of the non-executive chair and the non-executive commissioners, as distinctive from the executive. I think the trick for me, in terms of getting the time commitment right, is to really underlined how to get the best out of the executive, who are there full time and who are there to do the job, and not trap myself into trying to second-guess them and do their job for them. That is probably the main answer to both parts of your question—that I will put in whatever time is necessary, but I will need to learn my way into making sure I am not trying to do everything myself and to second-guess what the executive, who are paid to do the job full time, should be doing.

- Q24 **Craig Mackinlay:** I do understand that. Non-exec roles can be really tough, because if things go awry, people will make a beeline to your desk for you to give a comment and a statement. You often find that the executives, who are fairly well paid and full time, are nowhere to be seen, and it will be your head on the line if there is some howling error. How do you feel about having such broad shoulders?

**John Pullinger:** I think that goes with the territory. If you are in a role in public life, and particularly the chair of a major organisation, you have to have those broad shoulders. But I would also expect the executive to step up and take responsibility. As I have described, it is the executive that have the responsibility for delivering all of this, and they must take that responsibility. But, ultimately, as chair, I have the accountability to you and to the public for making sure the system is doing what it should be doing.

- Q25 **Craig Mackinlay:** Just some very quick-fire questions. Do you think current electoral law is fit for purpose? The Electoral Commission obviously has the key role in interpreting it into something useful and purposeful for candidates and agents to apply.

**John Pullinger:** The law is what it is, and we have to make the best of it—we are doing that, and elections are happening under the law. Does it need change? Absolutely it does, and the Law Commission report has made that very clear. The law is so complicated that it is very hard for anybody to know how they should navigate their way through it. There is a prospectus for change. The challenge at the moment is that the Government has an awful lot of other things to change, and it would be a complicated piece of law to sort this all out. But does it need doing? Yes.

- Q26 **Craig Mackinlay:** You have heard the comments from Members—perhaps the Conservative ones more than others—who have queries and doubts about what the Electoral Commission is all about. Briefly—forget the mission statements and all the rest of it—what do you think the Electoral Commission should be for?

**John Pullinger:** It is about giving everybody involved in elections the confidence that the elections are being run freely and fairly, and about



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impartiality, to follow up the comment from Mr McCartney earlier—the idea that this is not one side or other having an undue influence over what is going on. For me, learning the lessons of what has gone before about how to make that happen is going to be a very important way of taking the right steps for the future.

**Q27 Craig Mackinlay:** Finally—you touched on this briefly in your opening statements—what do you think the big threats on the horizon are in terms of keeping UK elections free and fair?

**John Pullinger:** Mostly, the threats that come up are the ones you had not anticipated; it is something that might happen down the track that we are not really aware of—

**Craig Mackinlay:** Rumsfeld’s great unknowns.

**John Pullinger:** But in terms of what is known, if confidence in the system is undermined by the controversies we have had in the past, that is a real difficulty.

The other issue is the role of technology—the role of technology in campaigning and just in running elections. There is a risk there that something will not work or will somehow undermine the integrity of the electoral system, and we need to really worry about that and make sure we are on top of it.

**Craig Mackinlay:** Thank you, Mr Speaker.

**Chair:** Thanks, Craig. Any other questions?

**Christian Matheson:** Mr Speaker, could I ask one, please?

**Chair:** Again? You’ve had two goes. Go on then, Christian.

**Q28 Christian Matheson:** Thank you, Sir.

Mr Pullinger, there is an article in *The New York Times* this morning about legislative voter suppression being introduced in numerous states in the United States to make it more difficult for people to register to vote and to cast their votes. Heaven forbid that the same tactics crossed the Atlantic and you saw a Government, of any colour, introducing stuff you felt was detrimental to the opportunities people had to vote. What would be the role of the Electoral Commission in stepping in to advise, pre-legislation, or would you just leave things up to Parliament and implement whatever Parliament introduced?

**John Pullinger:** The Electoral Commission has a statutory duty to advise, and giving clear, impartial advice on something that appeared to be a threat seems to be absolutely what we should do. We should find ways of making that voice heard to Committees, the Government or anyone else who really needed to hear it.

**Chair:** Okay. John, thank you for your time. It was refreshing, and I am hoping we can all move forward together in a very positive way. That concludes the public session for today. Can Members please rejoin the



# HOUSE OF COMMONS

meeting in Teams to discuss what we have heard?