



OFFICIAL REPORT
AITHISG OIFIGEIL

Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 12 March 2020

Session 5



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Thursday 12 March 2020

CONTENTS

	Col.
DECISIONS ON TAKING BUSINESS IN PRIVATE	1
SCOTTISH ELECTIONS (REFORM) BILL: STAGE 2.....	2

STANDARDS, PROCEDURES AND PUBLIC APPOINTMENTS COMMITTEE
8th Meeting 2020, Session 5

CONVENER

*Bill Kidd (Glasgow Anniesland) (SNP)

DEPUTY CONVENER

*Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green)

COMMITTEE MEMBERS

*Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab)

*Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con)

*Gil Paterson (Clydebank and Milngavie) (SNP)

*Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con)

*Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP)

*attended

THE FOLLOWING ALSO PARTICIPATED:

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con)

Graeme Dey (Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans)

CLERK TO THE COMMITTEE

Katy Orr

LOCATION

The James Clerk Maxwell Room (CR4)

Scottish Parliament
Standards, Procedures and
Public Appointments Committee

Thursday 12 March 2020

[The Convener opened the meeting at 09:32]

Decisions on Taking Business in
Private

The Convener (Bill Kidd): Good morning everyone and welcome to the eighth meeting in 2020 of the Standards, Procedures and Public Appointments Committee. Agenda items 1 and 2 are decisions for the committee on whether to take business in private. Do members agree to take item 4 in private?

Members indicated agreement.

The Convener: Do members agree that consideration of a committee bill to amend the process for complaints against members of the Scottish Parliament should be taken in private at future meetings?

Members indicated agreement.

Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill:
Stage 2

09:32

The Convener: Item 3 is stage 2 proceedings on the Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill. I have a considerable amount to get through before we get to the meat of stage 2, so please bear with me.

I welcome Graeme Dey, Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans, and his accompanying officials. Officials are not permitted to speak on the record during formal proceedings. I also welcome Jeremy Balfour MSP, who has lodged amendments to the bill.

Members might find it helpful if I remind them of the stage 2 process. Everyone should have a copy of the bill as introduced, the marshalled list of amendments, which sets out the amendments in the order in which they will be disposed of, and the groupings.

There will be one debate for each group of amendments. I will call the member who lodged the first amendment in the group to speak to and move that amendment and to speak to all the other amendments in the group. I will then call other members who lodged amendments in the group to speak to their amendments and other amendments in the group; at that point they will not be asked to move their amendments. Members who have not lodged amendments in the group but who wish to speak should indicate that to me or the clerk and we will make sure that you are called.

If the minister has not already spoken on the group, I will invite him to contribute to the debate just before we move to the winding-up speech. The debate on each group will be concluded by my inviting the member who moved the first amendment in the group to wind up.

Following the debate on the group, I will check whether the member who moved the first amendment in the group wishes to press it to a vote or to seek to withdraw it. If the member wishes to press it, I will put the question on the amendment. If the member wishes to withdraw it, I will ask whether any member objects to that. If any member objects, the amendment is not withdrawn and the committee must immediately move to a vote on it. If any member does not wish to move their amendment when it is called, they should say, "Not moved" and do so audibly. Any other member who is present may move the amendment; if no one does so, I will immediately call the next amendment on the marshalled list.

Only committee members are allowed to vote. Voting in divisions is by a show of hands. It is

important that members keep their hands clearly raised until the clerks have recorded their votes. The committee is required to indicate formally that it has considered and agreed to each section of the bill, so I will put a question on each section at the appropriate point.

At the outset, I should say that if we have a tied vote on any amendment, as convener I will vote as I did in the division, and will do so consistently throughout the process.

I hope that that was clear to everyone.

Sections 1 to 3 agreed to.

Section 4—Electoral wards: number of councillors

The Convener: The first group is on the number of councillors in local electoral wards. Amendment 22, in the name of Mark Ruskell, is grouped with amendment 23.

Mark Ruskell (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Green): Good morning, everyone. Amendment 22, in my name, is quite a simple one. Its effect would be to remove the discretion of boundaries Scotland to recommend a two-member ward and to retain its ability to recommend boundary reviews of three, four or five-member wards. That reflects contributions that were made in the debate at stage 1, in which there was broad cross-party concern about the impact of more widespread use of two-member wards on the ground of proportionality. In the evidence that we took at stage 1, the minister was clear that, unfortunately, no assessment had been made of the impact on proportionality of introducing two-member wards, which was both surprising and a bit disappointing.

I should point out that amendment 22 does not affect section 1 of the Local Governance (Scotland) Act 2004, which was amended by and pertains to the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018. Members might remember that the 2018 act introduced the ability to select boundaries that were served by one or two-member wards. There were very special geographic circumstances around the argument for that, which I totally respect. Amendment 22 has been drafted in such a way that it does not affect that provision, which is specifically in relation to islands. I am still struggling to understand the circumstances under which, in a mainland situation, a two-member ward would be appropriate, but perhaps the minister will have relevant examples that might convince me otherwise.

I appreciate where the minister is coming from with his amendment 23. It is an attempt to pin down a little more the circumstances in which a two-member ward would be appropriate. I had a look at schedule 6 to the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973, but that does not really offer

any more guidance, to be honest. It says that, as a general rule of thumb, there should be equal numbers of electors within electoral wards, but that that can be overridden under “special geographic considerations”. However, it does not say what those are. That does not give me much comfort in relation to how a two-member ward might be selected and what such considerations might be in that circumstance.

I will leave my remarks there and listen with interest to what the minister has to say on the subject.

I move amendment 22.

The Convener: I call the minister to speak to amendment 23 and the other amendments in the group.

The Minister for Parliamentary Business and Veterans (Graeme Dey): Thank you, convener, and good morning. Amendments 22 and 23 are both concerned with multimember wards in local government electoral areas. The bill as introduced seeks to allow two and five-member wards in order to permit greater flexibility in specific local circumstances. The Parliament has already legislated to allow one and two-member wards in island areas, as we have heard, and the bill’s provisions will build on that by allowing the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland to tailor its proposals to take account of local circumstances and geographical considerations.

Mark Ruskell’s amendment 22 seeks to remove two-member wards as an option in any circumstance. I suggest that that goes too far, as the option of two-member wards gives the commission the flexibility that it needs in order to best adapt to individual communities with special circumstances. Our approach has been welcomed by the committee, and 70 per cent of those who responded to the relevant question in our consultation indicated support for it. Two-member wards allow the commission to reflect the geographical and historical distinctiveness of smaller communities and avoid it being obliged to shoehorn a smaller community into a larger one that might be, for example, on the other side of a body of water or a mountain range.

I observe that Mr Ruskell’s amendment does not take proper account of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018, with the result that an island community could be included in a one or three-member ward but not in a two-member ward, as that would be prohibited. I am sure that that was not his intention—I think that he indicated that—but that is what the amendment would achieve. That is another reason why I recommend that the committee does not agree to amendment 22.

All of that said, I fully understand the concern that two-member wards should not be overused,

so I have prepared amendment 23 following discussions with Adam Tomkins, who aired the issue in the stage 1 debate. The amendment highlights the existing duty, which Mark Ruskell indicated, on the boundary commission to balance the need to ensure parity in relation to the number of councillors per voter in a local government area with the need to respect any special geographical considerations.

I appreciate that some members might like to go further and more actively constrain the use of two-member wards, but it should also be borne in mind that the bill strengthens parliamentary oversight of the commission and that any proposals from it that would abolish or alter the boundaries of a local government electoral ward will have to be approved by the Parliament under the affirmative procedure.

We have considered whether an exceptional circumstances test could be adopted for the use of two and five-member wards, but there are a number of tricky issues with reaching a satisfactory test without undermining the commission's discretion. Ronnie Hinds, the chair of the commission, has written to me to indicate that restricting the use of two and five-member wards would limit the commission's ability to meet the aspirations of councils and communities to strike an optimal balance between parity and the other factors that it is obliged to consider. He has also suggested that any implications for proportionality would be better considered as part of any future review of the multimember wards system, and he notes that the likely date for the first proposal for a two-member ward other than for an island community is not until 2026.

I would be happy to discuss the issue further with interested members and the commission ahead of stage 3. However, amendment 22 would remove altogether the commission's ability to propose two-member wards and remove the ability for island areas to have two-member wards, which was agreed by the Parliament and is covered in section 19 of the 2018 act. I therefore ask Mark Ruskell not to press amendment 22. If it is pressed, I ask members to reject it.

I urge members to support amendment 23, as it emphasises the importance of the existing tests in relation to proposals by the commission on the design of local government electoral wards.

Jamie Halcro Johnston (Highlands and Islands) (Con): I agree with much of what the minister said. I am glad that he highlighted the comments that my colleague Adam Tomkins made in the debate.

I can see what Mark Ruskell is trying to do with amendment 22, but there are many areas in which it would simply not be suitable. I remind him that

there are single wards in the Highlands that are larger than the entirety of the central belt of Scotland. It is not just an issue for island communities, because there are other places in the Highlands that need to have flexibility, should the commission suggest it. For that reason, I will not support his amendment.

09:45

Neil Findlay (Lothian) (Lab): On balance, I think that I agree with the minister's position. It seems odd that, if we accepted Mark Ruskell's amendment 22, we would be able to have one-member wards and wards of three, four or five members, but not two-member wards. Is that two-ism? The logic of that makes no sense to me, so I agree with the minister's position.

Mark Ruskell: I think that Mr Findlay misunderstands what is proposed. The drafting of amendment 22 seeks to ensure that the provisions of the Islands (Scotland) Act 2018 would still apply, so it would still be possible to have one and two-member wards, but explicitly in the context of the 2018 act. The minister suggests that there is a difference of opinion there, but I have had legal advice that suggests that that is not the case. We could discuss the matter ahead of stage 3.

There is still a weakness around special geographic considerations. The minister mentioned bodies of water, mountains and so on. There are also the provisions that say that there must be a link to a community. If boundaries Scotland were to propose such an amendment, I think that it would make sense for a statement to be provided that related to the individual decision, which Parliament could scrutinise, because it is impossible to generalise in such situations.

Mr Halcro Johnston made a point about Highland wards. I live in a council ward that is almost the size of Luxembourg and which has three members, but it is difficult to generalise and to apply that to the context in which a two-member ward might be appropriate.

I feel that there is still something missing. Schedule 6 to the 1973 act does not give us much of a clue as to how such two-member wards would be applied. If the minister was minded to continue the discussion with a view to strengthening the consideration of this area in some way, I would be prepared not to press amendment 22. Mr Dey appears to be nodding. He is nodding—that is great. He has helped me to make up my mind.

The Convener: Do you wish to press amendment 22 or to withdraw it?

Mark Ruskell: I will withdraw it.

Amendment 22, by agreement, withdrawn.

Graeme Dey: I clarify that I am quite prepared to take away the idea of providing an explanation to accompany any proposal for a two-member ward. We can continue that dialogue to stage 3.

Amendment 23 moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.

Section 4, as amended, agreed to.

Section 5 agreed to.

Section 6—Electronic voting

The Convener: Amendment 4, in the name of the minister, is grouped with amendment 5.

Graeme Dey: I have made it clear throughout the bill process that the Government is committed to listening and responding to concerns and ideas that are designed to improve the electoral system. I am grateful for the perspectives and suggestions that have been offered by members of the committee and people beyond the Parliament.

Amendments 4 and 5 adopt the suggestion that was made by the Electoral Commission in its stage 1 evidence. The commission is already a key player in our elections, and other innovations in the bill reinforce its role in Scotland. Members will recall that the commission suggested that it was keen to play a formal part in evaluating pilot schemes in local government elections. As we will discuss in relation to Mr Balfour's amendments in the next grouping, we already have a robust system for trialling improvements to the electoral process, which is set out in section 5 of the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Act 2002. That section allows local authorities to propose pilots on a number of topics, including voting methods and electoral communications. The Scottish ministers consider those proposals and, if they are agreed, they are laid before the Parliament for approval.

At present, local authorities are obliged to evaluate the completed pilot and publish a report. I agree with the Electoral Commission's suggestion that that evaluation role is best suited to the commission's independent expertise. It is a role that it already performs for pilots in England and Wales and it has previously provided a similar service on an informal basis in Scotland. That the Electoral Commission was not given that function in the first place appears to have been the result of its not being fully established at the time of the enactment of the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Act 2002.

Amendment 5 seeks to transfer the statutory evaluation role from local authorities to the Electoral Commission. It will also reduce the workload for local authorities in relation to pilots, which will allow them to focus on the practicalities of designing and delivering those pilots. The

amendment also recognises the important contribution that can be made by stakeholders such as the Royal National Institute of Blind People Scotland, as the provisions encourage the Electoral Commission to consult as it considers appropriate.

Amendment 4 makes a consequential change that is needed as a result of amendment 5 amending the 2002 act. I ask members to support amendments 4 and 5.

I move amendment 4.

Mark Ruskell: Will the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities be consulted about this, because it is a shift in the powers of the Electoral Commission, is it not?

Graeme Dey: I am led to believe that there has been some contact with COSLA, and that that will be an on-going process.

Amendment 4 agreed to.

Amendment 5 moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.

Section 6, as amended, agreed to.

After section 6

The Convener: Amendment 1, the name of Jeremy Balfour, is grouped with amendments 2 and 3.

Jeremy Balfour (Lothian) (Con): It is a basic aspiration of all voters to be able to vote independently and in secret. That not only affords appropriate respect and equality of treatment to each voter but preserves a fundamental principle of our democratic system, which is that the ballot is secret. Often there is insufficient appreciation of the importance of the secrecy of the ballot. It is a vital and foundational principle that prevents voters from being threatened or rewarded for voting in a particular way. If their vote is secret, there is no evidence on which to pursue punishment or reward.

Three quarters of people with sight loss who were surveyed by the RNIB reported that they could not vote independently or in secret at the 2017 general election, and similar reports were received following the 2019 general election. Currently, there are two voting aids available to blind and partially sighted people in polling stations: a large-print ballot paper and a tactile voting device. The need to ensure that no ballot paper is different in a way that could identify the voter means that a large-print ballot paper can be used only as a guide for the standard ballot paper, not as a replacement.

The tactile voting device has been the subject of a High Court decision down in England, which

found that it alone was not sufficient to enable voters who are blind or partially sighted to vote without any need for assistance from the presiding officer or any companion. The use of either voting aid can result in having to show your vote to another person to be confident that you have voted for the person and party that you would like to win that particular seat or region.

I believe that it is important that the Scottish Government explores alternative voting methods, including electronic voting, that would enable people with sight loss to vote independently and in secret. Section 6 removes barriers in the current primary legislation that could limit or prevent future trials of electronic voting at local government elections. Amendment 1 recognises that the Government is on a journey with this issue, and I recognise the work that has been done already. My concern is that it is not a duty and there is no timescale for evaluating any of that work. Amendment 1 places a duty on the Scottish ministers, but it gives them the flexibility to delegate the functions to local authorities or others, if appropriate.

If amendment 1 is agreed to, it will support efforts to adapt the voting system so that blind and partially sighted voters can vote in secret, like everyone else in our country.

Amendment 2 requires the Electoral Commission to issue guidance to returning officers on their existing duty, but it specifies that that should include permitting the use of such tools as mobile phones or magnifiers. I understand that, at the last general election, which took place at the end of last year, the Cabinet Office sent out a letter to returning offices to say that the use of such tools should be allowed. However, that was not binding and there is mixed evidence from across the country, which shows that that did not happen in some places.

Many people with sight loss use mobile phones to read documents audibly or visually or carry pocket-sized video magnifiers to help them to read. For some time, the RNIB has argued that people with sight loss should be allowed to use such tools in the polling booth to help them to read the options on the ballot paper. Clearly, they would still not be allowed to photograph their ballot paper; that would remain a criminal offence. Amendment 2 would be particularly helpful for people with sight loss, as it would remove reliance on the tactile voting device which, as I said earlier, has been ruled unlawful. It would help to ensure that more people with sight loss would be able to vote independently and—this is key—in secret.

Amendment 3 is an enabling amendment. If it is passed, it will introduce time provisions for amendment 1.

I move amendment 1.

Jamie Halcro Johnston: I thank Jeremy Balfour for lodging these amendments, which I will support. It is obviously an important issue.

Alexander Stewart (Mid Scotland and Fife) (Con): I commend Jeremy Balfour for the work that he has done on this issue. It gives hope to individuals who have sight loss or are partially sighted that they will be respected in the process. That is what we are trying to achieve. The amendments give the issue the merit that it deserves, so I will support them.

Graeme Dey: I am very much supportive of the underlying intent of the amendments that Mr Balfour has lodged. The Government is committed to breaking down barriers to inclusion in our electoral system. However, I am afraid that there are a number of issues that prevent me from supporting Mr Balfour's amendments. That said, I commit today to consider further with him in advance of stage 3 whether it would be possible to make changes in this area.

The key problem that we have with amendment 1 is how the proposals interact with the current system for running pilots of this kind. As we discussed in the previous group, rules for proposing running pilots are already set out in section 5 of the Scottish Local Government (Elections) Act 2002. Under that act, local authorities propose pilots to the Scottish ministers, who bring appropriate proposals to the Parliament for approval. The local authority runs the pilot, evaluates it and publishes a report on its findings. As a result of amendments 4 and 5 being agreed to today, the Electoral Commission will in the future take on the evaluation role in ensuring independent and expert scrutiny of such pilots. I do not think that the Scottish ministers are best placed to run such pilots. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility for delivering elections and they are best placed to deliver pilots of the type envisaged in amendment 1.

Mr Balfour's amendments have raised questions around how pilots should be commissioned and the ways in which completion by a certain date can be required. I am happy to consider those points further with him. Although requiring the completion of a pilot by the end of 2024 would not, at first glance, seem unreasonable, such hard and fast deadlines might pose practical problems in the amount of initial work that would be required, including engagement with stakeholders, impact assessments, testing and proofing, as well as an appropriately rigorous procurement exercise. I say that to offer background, not to undermine in any way the commitment to work with Mr Balfour to see whether we can make progress in this area in the coming weeks.

To provide reassurance to Mr Balfour, I would like to record that the Government has been progressing work in this area over the past months. The approach has focused on what voters with sight loss told us would help them to overcome the barriers of the traditional system. After holding a series of workshops in 2019 with those who face those significant barriers to voting, we are already exploring a prototype solution to enable people with sight loss to cast their votes digitally. It is important to highlight, especially given the concerns about full online voting, that the prototype is not designed as a full end-to-end digital solution and will still produce a ballot paper.

10:00

The prototype, which is at an early stage of development, will undergo field trials with potential users in late spring or early summer this year. During that timeframe, I am happy to invite committee colleagues to join me in a session in which we can experience using the prototype for ourselves.

Amendment 3 would commence on the day after royal assent the provisions that would be introduced by amendment 1. That is fairly unusual and I am not clear why the usual convention of not commencing provisions within two months of royal assent should be departed from in this case.

Although I am sympathetic to the underlying intent of amendment 1, it does not sit well with existing powers and it would not add to the important work that is already in progress. Therefore, I ask Jeremy Balfour not to press amendment 1 to a vote or move amendment 3. However, if he does, I ask that members do not agree to amendments 1 and 3.

I appreciate that amendment 2 is motivated by a desire to promote inclusion. Requiring guidance for returning officers on appropriate tools for voters with sight loss is a laudable aim. As we have heard, basic guidance on that topic was issued by the Electoral Commission during the 2019 United Kingdom general election, and I know that the commission is open to further discussion on the best way in which to share that guidance.

Unfortunately, as amendment 2 is drafted, the provisions would take us outwith the powers of the Scottish Parliament, because the duty that the amendment would impose on the Electoral Commission would be a change for the whole of the UK, rather than just for devolved Scottish elections. As I said, I am supportive of the fundamental idea that is being considered, and I am happy to engage with Jeremy Balfour. I invite him not to move amendment 2, but if he does, I ask members to reject it.

Jeremy Balfour: I thank the minister for his remarks, which are helpful and deal with some of the issues that have been raised by my amendments.

The concern among some in regard to amendment 1 is that Governments and ministers come and go and, although I have no doubt that Graeme Dey and his Government are happy to push forward on the issues, future Governments might be less keen. It is important to put in place an appropriate timescale so that people do not have to wait for ever.

Maureen Watt (Aberdeen South and North Kincardine) (SNP): Are there any jurisdictions in which there is best practice that we can learn from in the field of making blind people feel that they are more included in the voting system?

Jeremy Balfour: I am not an expert in that area, so I am not able to answer the question, but I think that we have gone a long way as a country on that.

I would welcome further dialogue with the minister and his team over the next two or three weeks. In the light of his comments, I will withdraw amendment 1 and not move amendments 2 and 3, and I will not push them to a vote.

Amendment 1, by agreement, withdrawn.

Sections 7 to 9 agreed to.

Section 10—Attendance of observers at Scottish parliamentary elections

The Convener: Amendment 6, in the name of the minister, is grouped with amendments 7 to 9.

Graeme Dey: Amendments 6 to 9 are somewhat technical in nature and have been lodged at the request of the Electoral Commission. The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 requires the commission to prepare specific codes for observers at Scottish local government elections. The codes cover the applications process to be accredited, what processes may be observed and the conduct and rights of observers. The codes are of value to not only observers, but the electoral professionals who must accommodate observers in polling stations and at counts.

The Scottish Elections (Reform) Bill, as drafted, extends the duty on the commission to cover Scottish Parliament elections and by-elections, which is one of a number of provisions in the bill that cements the Electoral Commission's place in the Scottish electoral landscape.

The Electoral Commission has highlighted that there are no significant differences between observing at different electoral events, so there is no need for different codes for local government

and Scottish Parliament elections. The amendments therefore seek to remove any need for separate codes to be produced for local government and Scottish Parliament elections. The codes must be taken through a set process, which includes consultation with the Scottish ministers, laying before the Parliament and publication. The change will avoid duplication of effort and is consistent with provisions for referendums and with the approach in England and Wales. I invite members to support amendments 6 to 9.

I move amendment 6.

The Convener: Members have no questions. Do you have anything further to say, minister?

Graeme Dey: No, convener.

Amendment 6 agreed to.

Amendments 7 to 9 moved—[Graeme Dey]— and agreed to.

Section 10, as amended, agreed to.

Section 11 agreed to.

After section 11

Amendment 2 not moved.

Sections 12 and 13 agreed to.

Section 14—Financing of Electoral Commission

The Convener: Amendment 10, in the name of the minister, is grouped with amendments 11 to 19.

Graeme Dey: Members will recall that when I gave evidence at stage 1, there was a discussion about progress in reaching an agreement with the Scottish Parliament on its role in relation to the oversight of elections and the work of the Electoral Commission and how that would all come together. Questions were asked about reaching an agreement that suited all parties.

In the intervening period, there has been extensive discussion with the Parliament and these amendments are a consequence of that. Amendments 10 to 19 make a number of improvements to the bill's provisions, granting the Scottish Parliament an oversight role in relation to the Electoral Commission's activities concerning devolved Scottish elections. The commission will be funded by and accountable to the Scottish Parliamentary Corporate Body for the work that it carries out in relation to devolved Scottish elections.

We have been discussing with officials from the Scottish Parliament and the Electoral Commission how best to make those arrangements work

effectively. Amendments 10 and 11 clarify that the Parliament will only be obliged to reimburse the Electoral Commission in relation to expenditure that is properly incurred. That has been covered by a revised estimate which has been approved by the SPCB. However, the SPCB may reimburse any expenditure that is not covered by such estimates at its discretion.

Amendments 12 to 15 relate to the date by which the Electoral Commission is required to send an estimate of its income and expenditure for each financial year to the SPCB. Parliament officials have asked for discretion to vary the date on which estimates should be sent. The amendments enable the SPCB to determine that date.

Amendments 16 and 17 address the requirement for Electoral Commission income and expenditure to be

“consistent with the economical, efficient and effective exercise by the Commission of their devolved Scottish functions.”

The bill currently requires that to be confirmed by the SPCB, but we have agreed with the Electoral Commission and parliamentary officials that the duty should be placed on the Electoral Commission instead. That is consistent with the approach taken in the Scottish Parliamentary Commissions and Commissioners etc Act 2010, which established the Commission for Ethical Standards in Public Life in Scotland. The Electoral Commission's activities are subject to the existing audit requirements in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.

Amendments 18 and 19 remove sections 17 and 18 respectively. Those sections sought to set out audit arrangements to assist the SPCB in the exercise of its duties under the bill. Further discussion with Audit Scotland and the Auditor General for Scotland has resulted in the conclusion that those provisions are not necessary to enable the auditing of the Electoral Commission's devolved responsibility and that the existing audit arrangements are sufficient.

I invite members to support amendments 10 to 19.

I move amendment 10.

Amendment 10 agreed to.

Amendments 11 to 17 moved—[Graeme Dey]— and agreed to.

Section 14, as amended, agreed to.

Sections 15 and 16 agreed to.

Section 17—Examination of Electoral Commission by Comptroller and Auditor General

Amendment 18 moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.

Section 18—Audit and accounting officers

Amendment 19 moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.

Sections 19 to 28 agreed to.

Schedule agreed to.

Section 29—Reviews of local government wards and number of councillors

The Convener: Amendment 20, in the name of the minister, is grouped with amendment 21.

Graeme Dey: In its stage 1 report, the committee expressed support for review periods of 15 years for local government boundary reviews, subject to the introduction of five-year terms being retained in the bill. After productive engagement with the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland—which will soon be known as boundaries Scotland—I agree with the committee’s recommendation.

The approach in amendment 20 will give boundaries Scotland the time to balance careful consideration of local communities and the stability of recognisable boundaries. Fifteen years should be sufficient time to ensure that measured proposals for boundaries in each local government area can be put in place. We think that 15-year cycles will also improve the bill’s provision in relation to rolling reviews for local government areas, by allowing greater time to consider specific areas that require attention.

It has been suggested that a move to five-year terms should lead to the review period for Scottish Parliament boundaries being changed. I do not think that that case has been made. There are important differences, not least that a review of Scottish Parliament boundaries would always be undertaken as a single event.

However, I am convinced of the need to move the deadline for Scottish Parliament reviews to 2025, rather than 2024, as is currently provided for in the bill. Amendment 21 will make that small but important change, which will allow boundaries Scotland to submit its proposals 12 months before the Scottish Parliament elections in 2026, ensuring that there is access to the most recent and relevant data to inform recommendations.

I hope that members will support amendments 20 and 21, which were requested by the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland.

I move amendment 20.

Amendment 20 agreed to.

Section 29, as amended, agreed to.

Sections 30 and 31 agreed to.

Section 32—Scottish Parliament constituency boundaries: timing of first report

Amendment 21 moved—[Graeme Dey]—and agreed to.

Section 32, as amended, agreed to.

Sections 33 and 34 agreed to.

Section 35—Commencement

Amendment 3 not moved.

Sections 35 and 36 agreed to.

Long title agreed to.

The Convener: Thank you. That ends stage 2 consideration of the bill and the public part of the meeting. I thank the minister and his officials, and Jeremy Balfour, for attending.

10:15

Meeting continued in private until 10:30.

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