



**HOUSE OF COMMONS**  
LONDON SW1A 0AA

14<sup>th</sup> October 2021

*Jean Contrevent*

**RE: THE ELECTIONS BILL.**

Thank you for your recent correspondence in respect of your concerns regarding the *Elections Bill*. I have read your comments on this with interest.

A secure electoral system is a vital component of a healthy democracy. The *Elections Bill* will update elections law and deliver on manifesto commitments to protect our democracy and ensure that it remains secure, transparent and fair. It includes provisions on overseas electors, the voting rights of EU citizens, the accessibility of polls, identification to vote at polling stations and digital imprints, as well as provisions aimed at tackling postal vote fraud, undue influence and intimidation at elections.

Identification to vote has been backed by the Electoral Commission and the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe's Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights, which state that its absence is a security risk.

In Northern Ireland, voters have been required to produce personal identification before voting in polling stations since 1985, with photographic identification being required since 2003 when introduced by the last Labour Government. Ministers at the time noted that "*the Government have no intention of taking away people's democratic right to vote. If we believed that thousands of voters would not be able to vote because of this measure, we would not be introducing it at this time.*"

The Electoral Commission has also commented that "*since the introduction of photo ID in Northern Ireland there have been no reported cases of personation. Voters' confidence that elections are well-run in Northern Ireland is consistently higher than in Great Britain, and there are virtually no allegations of electoral fraud at polling stations.*"

Under the Government's proposals, anyone without an ID will be able to apply for a new free one – meaning that no voter will be disenfranchised. I believe that a secure electoral system is a vital component of a healthy democracy, and the public must have confidence that our elections are secure and fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.





I understand concerns about civil society organisations being prevented from adding their voice to the debate, but let me assure you that this would not be the case. I recognise the important role Civil Society Organisations (CSO) play in providing valuable information on a variety of policies. The Bill instead aims to make elections fairer and more transparent by requiring greater transparency from campaigners.

Clause 24 of the Bill, for instance, would require third party campaigns to give notice to the Electoral Commission at a lower level of expenditure than is currently required. Clause 25 would require campaign spending, which is part of a joint plan between a registered party and a third party or parties, to be counted as part of the spending limits of all parties involved.

I believe that joint campaigning has an important role to play in our electoral system, but it should be transparently and fairly regulated, particularly when it could be regarded as intending to achieve a common purpose.

In terms of concerns regarding reform to the Electoral Commission, as you may be aware, the Electoral Commission has sought in recent years to develop the capability to bring criminal offences before the courts. This is not a role that has ever been agreed by the Government or by Parliament.

I am concerned that the additional powers the Electoral Commission has taken on, risk creating conflicts of interest and wasting taxpayers' money. This is because the Electoral Commission is responsible for providing the advice and guidance on electoral law upon which the prosecutions it seeks to bring may depend.

Instead, it is the role of the police and the prosecution services to enforce electoral regulations and the Government intends to clarify this status quo in legislation through the *Elections Bill*. I can assure you that this is not about interfering with the investigative, operational, or enforcement decisions of the Electoral Commission. The reforms would not affect the ability of the Electoral Commission to undertake enforcement action as it deems necessary, but it would ensure greater accountability to Parliament.

Sir, now Lord, Eric Pickles' independent review into electoral fraud raised a number of concerns and made recommendations on the role of the Electoral Commission and the current system of oversight in 2016. These measures also seek to address those points in the context of wider work to protect our democracy and maintain public confidence in the electoral system.

My ministerial colleagues will, of course, consider proposals from the Committee on Standards in Public Life and from the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee, which are separately conducting inquiries into electoral regulation and the Electoral Commission.





Ultimately, the *Elections Bill* will broadly respond to recommendations in Lord Pickles' report into election fraud published in 2016 and builds upon long-term objectives set out in the Government's wider Defending Democracy Programme. The changes it will introduce alongside the *Online Safety Bill* and the *Counter-State Threats Bill* will protect our democracy from new and evolving threats and underpin the systems which support it.

Once again, thank you for having taken the time to contact me and if I can ever be of any further assistance to you then please do not hesitate to contact me again.

*With best wishes,*

**TOM PURSGLOVE MP  
MEMBER OF PARLIAMENT  
CORBY & EAST NORTHAMPTONSHIRE**