



**ELECTORAL MANAGEMENT BOARD FOR  
SCOTLAND**

**Malcolm Burr**  
Convener of the Board



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Dear Ms Smith,

## **UK PARLIAMENTARY GENERAL ELECTION TIMETABLE**

The Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) and the Electoral Registration Committee of the Scottish Assessors Association (SAA) have been made aware of a letter submitted to you by the Association of Electoral Administrators (AEA) raising the AEA's concerns that the timetable for UK Parliamentary General Elections and by-elections could be reduced from the current 25 working days back to the 17 working day period that applied until 6 April 2014. While the EMB and SAA share the concerns of the AEA and generally endorse the position taken in their letter, we represent those in Scotland with the statutory responsibility for delivery of such elections and wish to highlight our own concerns regarding the potential impact of such a change.

### **Role of the EMB**

The Electoral Management Board for Scotland (EMB) was created by the Local Electoral Administration (Scotland) Act 2011. This gave the Board "the general function of co-ordinating the administration of Local Government elections in Scotland." The Scottish Elections Reform Act 2020 formally extended the Board's remit to cover Scottish Parliament Elections, recognising the Board's role in the successful delivery of all major electoral events in Scotland. The Board includes both Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers and provides leadership, consistency of approach and support to the electoral community in Scotland. While its formal remit only covers devolved elections the Board's support, advice and guidance has been key to the successful delivery of recent UK elections in Scotland including the UK Parliamentary General Elections in 2015, 2017 and 2019 and European Parliamentary Elections in 2014 and 2019.

The Electoral Registration Committee of the SAA represents the 15 EROs across Scotland, three of whom are members of the EMB.

## **Repeal of the Fixed Term Parliament Act**

The repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 was a manifesto commitment of the current Government and the delivery of this commitment, potentially through the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 (Repeal) Bill is a matter for the UK Parliament to determine. ROs and EROs would as always work within legislation to deliver elections with results in which the voter can have full confidence.

## **The UK Parliamentary Election Timetable**

However the Parliamentary Joint Committee on the Fixed Term Parliaments Act has recommended that a working party needs to be established to review the 25-day statutory period for an election, with a view to shortening it. This and other reported speculation around the reduction of the timetable back to the 17 working day period in force prior to 2014 is alarming to ROs and EROs in Scotland. Such a timetable would not make an election “difficult” to deliver, it would make it impractical, virtually impossible, and at extreme risk given the current conditions and broader Regulations under which elections are delivered.

The letter submitted by the AEA details well the challenges of planning and delivering an election and the multiple diverse workstreams involved. The volume of legislative change in recent years has added to the complexities of tasks for both registration and electoral administration.

The fundamental issue, however, is that the current timetable was put in place because it was accepted that the shorter one was placing the sound delivery of elections at risk. The 17 day timetable simply did not work due to the pressures of postal voting on demand and rolling registration. Ballot papers that are to be issued to postal voters cannot be printed until nominations close. Packs then need to be sent out to voters in time for them to be received, completed and returned. In a 17 day timetable there is simply not enough time for this, especially for overseas and service voters. Huge volumes of ballot papers need to be printed. This is a physical process that takes a fixed period. The conduct of the Scottish Parliament Election in May 2021 under the conditions of Covid also resulted in a significant increase in the number of postal voters, an increase that will endure.

Indeed, when on 13 July 2011, Mr Mark Harper MP, then Minister for Political and Constitutional Reform, announced the publication of draft legislation on three electoral administration provisions, including the extension of the timetable from 17 days to 25 days, in a written statement he noted that the very limited time available for the postal vote process in the 17 day timetable “compromises effective participation in elections by certain types of voter, particularly overseas and service voters.” Extending the timetable to 25 days increased the time between the deadline for nominations and polling day, thus allowing administrators to begin printing ballot papers earlier. That position has not changed in the years since the provision was brought into force on 6 April 2014 by article 3 of the Electoral Registration and Administration Act 2013 (Commencement No 5 and Transitory Provisions) Order 2014.

It was already clear in 2011 that a 17 day timetable was not sufficient and given the then volume of postal voters was potentially excluding many voters putting elections at risk. That prompted welcome action by Government to extend the timetable. With a significant increase in postal voter numbers and online registration which has seen the number of applications rise ahead of an election the situation has only become more challenging since then. Across Great Britain the number of registration applications on the final day before each UK Parliamentary General Election rose by over 36% between 2015 and 2019 to reach over 660,000. There has also been a significant increase in the number of Overseas Electors since the 2010 UK Parliamentary General Election.

A reduction of the timetable may be a policy consideration but practically it would render an election undeliverable, with the situation only exacerbated by other anticipated changes to legislative requirements, such as the introduction of Voter ID.

The EMB, ROs and EROs across Scotland are committed to the delivery of elections that produce results in which the voter can have full confidence. The interests of the voter must be placed firmly at the centre of all electoral planning and legislation. A reduction of the timetable would not be in the interest of the voter as potentially very significant numbers of voters would not receive their ballot papers in time to participate in the election.

The EMB and SAA understand that the reports about a reduction in the timetable are perhaps speculative. However to support your own consideration of these matters the Board wish to highlight the issues above and indeed those in the letter from the AEA. As the then Minister stated, a 17 day timetable did not work prior to 2014. The pressures in 2021 are even greater and any reduction in the timetable would make no sense given the basic technical processes involved in printing ballot papers.

The EMB and SAA would be happy to meet you or your civil servants to discuss these matters more fully or indeed to discuss any element of the delivery of UK Elections in Scotland.

Yours sincerely

**MALCOLM BURR**

Convener of the Electoral Management  
Board for Scotland

**PETE WILDMAN**

Chair of the Scottish Assessors Association's  
(SAA) Electoral Registration Committee  
Member of the EMB

