

18th February 2022

Protecting the independence of our elections watchdog

I am writing to you as the Director of Unlock Democracy on the behalf of our 34,000 members and supporters.

The Government's Elections Bill arrives in the House of Lords for its 2nd reading on Wednesday.

I hope by now you will have received a briefing from the coalition we are part of. This highlights concerns about the bill and proposals for amendments.

Free and fair elections are the cornerstone of our democracy.

It's vital that the laws that govern those elections do not seek to give advantage to a single party. That's why, when major changes are made to electoral law, they are best done with cross-party support.

Unfortunately the Elections Bill was pushed through the House of Commons with little scrutiny (and in the case of the proposals to extend First Past the Post, no advance scrutiny at all). The bill gives this Government, and future governments, unprecedented power over the way our elections are run.

I want to give you one clear example of this.

Elections in the UK are overseen by an independent watchdog, the Electoral Commission. This bill would give the power to the Government of the day to set the commission's policy and strategy. Furthermore oversight of the Commission's work is carried out by the Speaker's Committee, which now, for the first time, has a Government majority.

Put simply, this leaves the fox guarding the henhouse.

It means that a Conservative Government could tell the Electoral Commission to focus its efforts on investigating union funding of Labour. It could mean that a future Labour Government tells the Commission to focus investigations on Conservative donors.

This power shouldn't be in the hands of any Government - it should stay in the hands of the independent watchdog.

It's only been a few months since the unfortunate attempt to sideline the independent Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards over the Owen Paterson affair.

The Government was defeated in that attempt to remove an independent watchdog. We hope that the House of Lords will protect another, the Electoral Commission.

Wednesday's second reading is the starting point for that. Peers have a vital role to play in this and I hope you will be there to stand up for democracy on Wednesday.

Best wishes



Tom Brake - Director of Unlock Democracy