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REFLECTIONS ON BEING A REGIONAL CO-ORDINATOR

When I was asked to be the Regional Co-ordinator, I think the first thing that hit me after the initial pleasure and excitement (and, as sad as that sounds, it is true) was – what have I let myself in for?

Now the election is over and I have had a chance to stop and think about it, and thinking is not something we often get time to do, I have a number of reflections.

I have been working in local government since 1984. During this time, there have been the vast changes in the way that local government goes about doing its business. There is a massive and growing agenda that faces all local authorities, whatever their size and/or status. There are guiding principles in running elections that our colleague local government officers probably don't appreciate. Elections have to be conducted correctly, first time and every time. There is no "acceptable" margin of error. The 80:20 rule will not do. Elections have to be conducted precisely in accordance with the law, but the law is ancient, confusing, and unhelpful and often, when it comes to the significant questions you want an answer to, unclear. Election work is pretty much self-contained, not under the political control, a specialist area that at times can attract a degree of media and other attention simply unheard of anywhere else. Yet that, despite its pitfalls and high expectations, is the very reason why I for one find it so engrossing and involving. Also, and without wishing to sound too "cheesy" there is a strong public service element that for me means it is something worth doing and worth doing well. It is, after all, the foundation of why we all work in local government. It is democracy.

My first reflection, as a general point, is that the pilot that the four Regional Co-ordinators undertook started, by everyone's consensus, later than we would have all liked. Had we had a couple more months to set things up, I think we would have done some things differently and could have achieved more.

What was it that we did? Having set the office up, we ran an introductory seminar (if we had had more time, I think we might have run more, spreader wider across the region), we then

provided advice, support and assistance having gained information from both the authorities holding elections and those who did not. Again, had we had more time, I think we would have been more proactive about arranging secondments for those new to elections but not having elections in authorities where there were experienced electoral administrators conducting elections this year. We did have some very helpful offers of assistance from experienced electoral administrators and, indeed, Returning Officers who we could have parachuted in to an area if there were significant problems. But, fortunately, we didn't have any so we didn't need their help, but they are now on the list!

In terms of specific queries, over the time we were running, we had some 200-300 queries. They came in at times thick and fast, particularly around peak areas of activity (and concern). Many were seeking affirmation of a view clearly thought through, well researched and considered. Others perhaps from less experienced Returning Officers and/or election administrators had not taken the time and trouble to review, for example, the Electoral Commission's excellent manual on elections.

So, what would I categorise at the good end of the spectrum?

Well, there are clearly a lot of folk working in elections who do know what they are doing, do it very well, apply the law correctly, use guidance wisely, but also know that on occasions it is helpful to have a conversation with somebody and ask – on this particularly difficult point, do you agree with my call? There is also a lot of good advice out there. I have mentioned already the Electoral Commission's work and certainly in my judgement in the last few years they have raised the level of their game considerably. The AEA continues to produce high quality material and advice, whether through their website or elsewhere. Perhaps a learning point is to make sure that wherever we go next, whether it is with regional co-ordination or performance management we do so in a co-ordinated manner and use the best of what is out there and the best skills of the people out there and work together as a unit – Government department, Electoral Commission, AEA, and SOLACE. Let's not all try to do what others do, only do it worse. Let us take the best of each, join it up and make sure there are no gaps.

So, what was not so good?

We did experience inconsistency and, at times, had real concerns about a few people's overall understanding and application. There is sound and helpful guidance already out there, but some people are not reading it. Why aren't they? There are also situations where staff new to elections, whether in the Returning Officer or election administration role, need

much more support than they are currently getting. The old traditional role of a Chief Executive automatically being the Returning Officer is redundant. I am not knocking Chief Executives per se, far from it. But elections are now quite different from say 20 years ago, they are complex, demand considerable time and energy, and there is already an unbelievable call on the time and energy on every Chief Executive in the 21st century to run their Council. You do, in my view, need a senior local authority officer in each local authority to at least perform a role akin to that of the Returning Officer, but does the Chief Executive / Senior Council Officer “automatically” appointed as Returning officer as it was part of their job really have the time and inclination to go through the training to be Returning Officer and to do it well? There are those who are interested and enthusiastic and do it. And long may they continue to do so. But is that good enough? Is relying on enthusiasts to run this vital part of our country’s democracy good enough? There needs to be mandatory training to ensure that Returning Officer and electoral administrators are hitting the baseline basic requirements of competency across the board. But maybe we also need to ask – does this basic structure work? That may be an issue for another place and another day, but I think it is something we all need to reflect upon.

Another area where I think we need to rethink and regroup is around the liaison with the Police, particularly the SPOCs. We had a very good relationship and liaison with the Police in our area, but many of them were new to the world of electoral law, found themselves having this job added to their existing and considerable duties with little or no additional information or notice, were grateful for the assistance albeit limited that we were able to give to them and I thought did an excellent job. But we need those SPOCs to continue in their role, and gain a deeper understanding of electoral law. We all can help them and, indeed, they can help us, but it needs to be an on-going relationship. Nothing will be worse than appointing new SPOCs every election say three months before each election, depending upon the needs of the Police. As a pilot, it did what it needed to do, but in the long term, we need to develop an ongoing and long-term relationship with specific and designated senior police officers so they understand our needs, and we understand theirs as well. We had the first glimmerings of a relationship that could deliver so much to prevent (and where appropriate, detect) fraudulent practices, but there is more to do.

Before I go on to talk about the future, I must just mention the team that I had working with me in Southampton, without whom the South East Pilot would not have been possible.

Malcolm Dumper, many of you will know and I will simply say that his acknowledgement as an expert in this field is fully justified. I couldn’t have done this without him. Claire Chapman ran the office efficiently and effectively and handled all the administration with calm

precision. Many of you will have now met and spoken to Karen Quaintmere from the Electoral Commission whose skills, resources and ability we were fortunate to have. She showed herself to be immensely able in every respect. I believe that she would, if asked, also say that she found the whole process helpful; she is the “maître d” of the Electoral Commission’s Guidance on Elections and this gave her the benefit to apply that guidance but also learn all sorts of additional information, wrinkles, skills, tips, etc which will no doubt find their way into the next iteration (including, for those at the South-East wash-up seminar, the “Whetnall Principle”!)

So what of the future? I think the regional approach is here to stay and I support it. We need it rolled out nationally. I can see a world where a group of Regional Co-ordinators cover the country (and isn’t it about time that the Electoral Commission’s role in Scotland was brought in line with that in England, as well as bringing parish council elections, referenda and Business Improvement District referenda within the ambit of the Electoral Commission?) Where there are pinch points in the annual calendar, eg local elections, regional co-ordination will need more resources from the centre. But I can see a group of Regional Co-ordinators providing a governance framework with support from the Electoral Commission. Whether there is any power of direction or more than just co-ordination is perhaps for others to decide, but I am not convinced that that need is not there.

I am not, however, of the view that the current status quo can carry on for much longer. As well as resolving the role and functions of the Electoral Commission and, hopefully, consolidating them and making them more consistent, we also need to have clarity as to the role of the Department for Constitutional Affairs (DCA). Their approach, as compared to the Home Office, is light years away, and John Sills and his team deserve a lot of credit for that, but I still think there are, on occasions, areas of conflict and overlap between DCA and the Electoral Commission, and I think they would both work better if they sorted that out at the same time as regional co-ordination is perhaps rolled out. If we are to have an overall structure, everyone’s roles and boundaries need careful thought, review and clarity.

Within that ambit, as well as sorting out matters such as comprehensive and consistent guidance, having it monitored and driven down from the Regional Co-ordination office, I think we also want to see the Electoral Commission itself having more teeth. How frustrating it was to see all the excellent work on integrity unpicked by those with a direct interest in its outcome, ie the political parties. How much better it would have been if the electorate, surely the people for whom the electoral system should ultimately be driven, had had their interest treated as paramount. Integrity is more important than protecting vested interests.

I have also mentioned the performance management framework. That, in my opinion, is a major factor in rolling out regional co-ordination because without it I don't believe it will work. We are to have performance indicators. They have to be useful, intelligent and be of direct benefit to managing improvement. However, indicators alone are not enough. They will only give you, at best, partially well informed questions. How is it turned into genuinely robust information that demonstrates areas of deficiency or areas for improvement? How are those areas improved? How do you prove or evidence improvement? All that, in my view, requires a new approach between the Electoral Commission, DCA, AEA, SOLACE and all of us who work in the electoral field. All of us need to work together to deliver this, within the ambit of the White Paper on local government (whenever that arrives) and all the changes that we expect in due course to the local government landscape.

Throw in a light dusting of changes to the electoral cycle, possibly directly-elected Cabinets and 2009 with possible local, national and European elections, and I only have one thing to say – single flight to Spain anyone?!