

Document 1 from 27 April – Briefing on Public Attitudes to the UK’s Democratic System Report - Professor Alan Renwick, UCL –

**CABINET SECRETARY FOR CONSTITUTION, EXTERNAL AFFAIRS
AND CULTURE
MINISTER FOR PARLIAMENTARY BUSINESS
MINISTER FOR INDEPENDENCE**

Meeting/Event Briefing

What	Briefing for Ministers, advisers and officials from Professor Alan Renwick on UCL Constitution Unit Report: Public Attitudes to the UK’s Democratic System
Who	Professor Alan Renwick, Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit and Professor of Democratic Politics at University College London (see biography at Annex B) The briefing by Professor Renwick (in person) will be attended by: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Cabinet Secretary for Constitution, External Affairs and Culture (in person)• Minister for Parliamentary Business (in person)• Minister for Independence (in person)• David Rogers, Director (facilitator)(in person)• Approximately 20 officials (in person and online)
When	Thursday 27th April from 10:00 to 11:00
Where	Room 4E.01 in St Andrew’s House. The seminar will be hybrid (in person and on Teams)
Why	Professor Renwick wrote to you on publication of the Constitution Unit’s report, and offered a briefing for Ministers, advisers and officials. This has been accepted and organised as a hybrid seminar-type event, incorporating a presentation from Professor Renwick followed by a Q&A session facilitated by David Rogers

Official support	[redacted]
Comm/ Media	n/a

Intended outcome	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• An understanding of the latest research into UK public attitudes to democracy, focusing on integrity and accountability, with potential lessons for Scotland’s democratic institutions.• An opportunity to discuss Professor Renwick’s wider work on referendums, constitutional conventions, citizens assemblies and electoral reform
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Key message	While the report shows that trust in politicians at UK level is low, trust in Scotland's devolved democratic institutions remains high. Both the Scottish Parliament and Scottish Government will continue to support and develop strong mechanisms for upholding integrity and accountability.
Sensitivities	None. Alan Renwick is an experienced academic, familiar with the Scottish Government's work (including on the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland and the Referendums Framework Bill). We do not think there are particular sensitivities to note for this session

Agenda/ Running Order (agreed with participants)	Chair: David Rogers 10am – start and introductions 10.05 – 10.30am – briefing by Professor Renwick 10.30 – 11am – Q&A 11am – close
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Briefing Contents	Annex A: Agenda Annex B: Professor Renwick biography Annex C: Constitution Unit Democracy in the UK after Brexit Project, including report key findings Annex D: Electoral Reform
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Annex A: Agenda

Thursday 27th April

Facilitator: David Rogers

10am: Start and introductions

10.05-10.30: Briefing by Professor Renwick
(briefing on public attitudes to the UK's democratic system, plus brief outline of other areas of the UCL Constitution Unit's work)

10.30-11am: Q&A facilitated by David Rogers
(coming to Ministers first for questions / comments, followed by officials)

11am: Close

Annex B: Professor Renwick biography

Position: Professor of Democratic Politics and Deputy Director of the Constitution Unit at UCL

The following is largely taken from Alan Renwick's profile page on the UCL website.

Alan Renwick's research focuses on the mechanisms through which citizens can engage in formal democratic politics and policy-making, particularly elections, referendums, and citizens' assemblies.

Democracy in the UK after Brexit

Alan is leading the Unit's ESRC-funded project on [Democracy in the UK after Brexit](#), which is employing large-scale surveys and running a citizens' assembly to explore how people in the UK think of democracy and their broad conceptions of democracy relate to their more specific preferences on how democratic institutions should operate.

Elections and Referendums

Much of Alan's current research focuses on the conduct of elections and referendums. Between 2019 and 2021, he chaired the [Working Group on Unification Referendums on the Island of Ireland](#), which examined how any future referendums on the unification question in Ireland would best be designed and conducted. In 2019, he completed a project looking at ways of improving the [quality of the information and discussion](#) during election and referendum campaigns. This work fed directly into the 2018 report of the [Independent Commission on Referendums](#).

Alan is one of the world's leading experts on processes of [electoral reform](#): he has written two major academic books on the subject and a third book aimed for a general audience. He has also contributed to public debates in the UK and elsewhere. His most recent research focuses in particular on the 'personalisation' of European electoral systems.

He was [highly critical](#) of the UK Government's proposal – now part of the Elections Act 2022 – for the UK Government to set *out a Strategy and Policy Statement in relation to the Electoral Commission, arguing that it “risks violating the independence of the Electoral Commission”*. He also argued that “a review of Electoral Commission accountability is needed in light of the devolution of many electoral matters to the Scottish Parliament and Senedd.”

Citizens' Assemblies

Alan is a leading voice in debates about the development of more deliberative approaches to democracy, particularly through citizens' assemblies. Besides the current project on [Democracy in the UK after Brexit](#), with its Citizens' Assembly on Democracy in the UK, he led the project to run a [Citizens' Assembly on Brexit](#) in September 2017, which gave unique insights into what kind of Brexit members of the public preferred once they had had the chance to learn and think in depth about the options. This project was part of the ESRC-funded [UK in a Changing Europe](#) initiative. Before that, he was part of the [Democracy Matters](#) project, and he has examined in depth the idea of establishing a [constitutional convention](#) to consider issues of constitutional and democratic reform in the UK.

Alan was on the stewarding group for the Citizens' Assembly of Scotland.

He was also a member of the Expert Working Group on Institutionalising Participatory and Deliberative Democracy Working Group which delivered its recommendations to Scottish Government in October 2022 [IPDD report](#).

Annex C: Constitution Unit Democracy in the UK after Brexit Project

The report, *Public Preferences for Integrity and Accountability in Politics*, that Alan Renwick will be briefing on the third of four reports that will be published by the UCL Constitution Unit as part of its Democracy in the UK after Brexit project, examining public attitudes to democracy in the UK today.

The first report, published in January, set out the findings of a survey of public opinion conducted in July 2021.

The second report, published in April 2022 set out the findings of a citizens assembly on democracy in the UK, which ran between September and December 2021.

This third report sets out the survey findings of public attitudes to the operation of the UK's democratic system,

The final report will present an overarching analysis of public attitudes to democracy across the UK today.

The **main findings of the third report**, which draws its findings from a UK-wide survey of over 4000 people, conducted in August and September last year, were set out by Professor Renwick in his initial correspondence:

- Public trust in politicians and confidence in their ethical standards is low, with most respondents believing that the system for protecting standards needs to be strengthened.
- Those in power should be held accountable by a strong system of checks and balances, provided through parliament, the courts, and other independent institutions.
- While the cost of living and the NHS are most people's top priorities, people do also care about the health of democracy in the UK – and want political discourse to be more honest.

Professor Renwick noted that, while much of the report concerns itself with public attitudes towards the Westminster parliament and the UK government, many of its findings are relevant to the devolved legislatures and administrations, as are thematic insights into public trust, checks and balances, the health of democracy, and public participation.

Other areas considered by the report include:

- Relations between government and parliament
- Electoral reform
- Lords reform
- Referendums and citizens' assemblies
- Role of judges

Annex D: Electoral Reform

The SG [consultation](#) on electoral reform closed on 15 March 2023. It:

- Considered extending candidacy rights to 16 and 17 year-olds and to foreign nationals with limited leave to remain
- Highlighted possible changes to assist candidates in Local Government elections, such as freepost communications and the presentation of candidate address information.
- Sought views on how to increase voter registration
- Sought views on how to improve accessibility in elections, to ensure all people can vote independently and in secret. This included work to explore alternatives to the Tactile Voting Device (TVD) that could be made available in polling places to assist people with sight loss to vote in person, such as ballot papers with tactile additions.
- Considered the small number of people resident in Scotland without voting rights, such as asylum seekers and people detained under mental health legislation (note: those granted refugee status have been able to vote in Scottish devolved elections since 2020).
- Looked at options for rearranging scheduled elections in response to exceptional circumstances.
- Considered further changes in relation to the Electoral Commission (including a greater oversight role by the Scottish Parliament), the Electoral Management Board for Scotland and Boundaries Scotland (including making boundary change recommendations apply automatically without Parliamentary approval).
- Addressed questions arising from the UK Elections Act 2022, including the possible adoption for devolved elections of measures on campaign finance, undue influence, intimidation and notional spending.
- Discussed the implications of the Elections Act overriding Scots law on digital imprints and asks if any elements of the Scottish system should be retained.

Accessibility Of Elections

- The Scottish Government wants to ensure that elections are accessible to all voters and is keen to address any barriers to voting and engaging in the electoral process more widely. We are exploring multiple options in the 2023 consultation, including changing the legislative requirements on polling station staff to provide a greater range of support options for voters.
- We are also exploring public views on whether the maximum number of people one person can assist in a polling station (called a 'companion') should be increased. At present, this is limited to two people per companion per election – This approach may add complications for example if someone had multiple care responsibilities in one family. Some people feel a limit of two helps prevent one companion from influencing too many people in an election.

- The Government is interested to hear views on whether voters should be able to choose to receive poll cards digitally in the future. Currently all poll cards are sent out in paper format to voters ahead of an election - a future digital option could benefit people who are blind or have sight loss. It might also help ensure that people who are away from home – such as students in term-time residences – receive their poll cards.

UK Elections Act 2022: Electoral Commission

- Elections Act changes in relation to the Electoral Commission are now in force.
- The UKG consultation on a draft [statement](#) guiding the Electoral Commission closed on 5 December 2022. A final version has not yet been announced.
- The Minister for Parliamentary Business [wrote](#) to the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on 2 September reiterating that the Statement is an unwelcome and unnecessary interference with the independence of the Electoral Commission.
- The Committee's [Report](#) on the draft Statement published on concluded:
"The overwhelming viewpoint from the evidence received was that no Statement is necessary at the current time: and no evidence has been provided justifying it. However, if there is to be a Statement, the current draft needs to be fundamentally rewritten."

UK Elections Act 2022: voter ID and other changes

- Remain opposed to introduction of voter ID. It risks significant voter confusion and has not been introduced in response to any clearly identified problem. Few people accepted the rationale that was set out by the UK Government or approved of its plans.
- Voter ID will mean additional responsibilities for returning officers and polling staff in Scotland at UK parliamentary elections. That fact – along with the different electoral systems and franchises in operation - underlines the need to avoid elections to the UK Parliament being held at the same time as a devolved poll. The consultation proposed a presumption against a devolved election being held on the same day as an election to the UK Parliament in the same area.
- The consultation sought views on adopting the Elections Act changes on campaign finance and campaigning for devolved elections. While legislative consent was refused for the Elections Bill, the Government indicated a willingness to consider legislation on these issues.

Candidacy for 16 and 17 year olds

- We have committed to bringing forward legislation on electoral reform, to be in force before the next Scottish Parliament elections, that will enable more people to stand as candidates at Scottish Parliament and Local Government elections.
- 16 and 17 year olds represent one of a small number of groups which have voting rights but not candidacy rights for Scottish Parliament and Local Government elections.
- There could be several benefits to extending the right to stand – it may help foreground younger perspectives on key issues, and avoid the impression that frontline politics is only of interest/accessible to older sections of the population.
- According to recent University of Edinburgh research, the extension of voting rights has resulted in a long-term increase in turnout among young people.
- The consultation has highlighted several issues to overcome if 16 and 17 year-olds are to be allowed to stand for election. These include wellbeing concerns; the potential exposure of young people to intimidation; working hours; impact on education and data protection issues.

Document 2 from 27 April – Meeting with officials – ‘Building a New Scotland Series’ –

Proposed **agenda**:

1. Presentation on draft paper [redacted]
2. Discussion