

PRESS RELEASE

SARK ELECTION: REPORT OF THE INDEPENDENT OBSERVER

The Report of the Independent Observer for Sark's Election was published today.¹²

Howard Knight, the Independent Election Observer for Sark (December 2014) summarised his report

"The operation was a success, but the patient is still some way from health"

Mr Knight, with election and election observation experience in many countries, was selected by the government of Sark to be the Independent Observer of its elections planned to take place in December 2014.

As it happened, there were just 16 candidates for 16 vacancies, meaning that there was no election, although there was a ballot to determine which of the candidates took the 14 seats with 4 year terms and which 2 candidates were elected for 2 year terms to fill resignation vacancies.

Mr Knight said:

"What had been planned as a standard election observation – albeit one modified to meet Sark's unique governance and electoral arrangements – had to be re-prioritised into assessing the democratic context and into trying to solve a mystery. The mystery, of course, was to try to unravel whether there were only 16 candidates as the result of some conspiracy or by happenstance."

During the course of his observation, Mr Knight says he met or had written communications with more than 20% of the electorate whilst he was on Sark and in the weeks after he left. He thanks everyone who contributed their experiences and perceptions of the current state of democracy on Sark.

So far as the arrangements for the election itself and the conduct of the ballot, Mr Knight said

"I am happy to be able to confirm, without any hesitation or reservation, that the arrangements that had been made for the conduct of the election – from determining the timetable, to constructing the Electoral Register, to inviting and checking nominations and then preparing for the printing and security of ballot papers, election day arrangements, conducting the count and declaring the results – were excellent." (Para 27)

However, Mr Knight has made some proposals for the government of Sark to consider, following consultation, about particular election arrangements. In particular, he has recommended that Sark ought to provide the opportunity for

- proxy voting to enable those individuals, who would otherwise be dis-enfranchised by reason of absence or disability, to cast their votes (Para 46), and
- public inspection of a marked register, indicating which citizens had cast their votes, although not which way they had voted (Para 62).

Having investigated the circumstances in which only 16 nominations were received for 16 vacancies, Mr Knight said:

"Despite every effort to uncover evidence to support the view that only 16 candidates being nominated had been the outcome of malign practice or influence, I found none."

He concluded:

¹ The Report was delayed by Mr Knight having to respond to serious family illness. He apologises for the delay in publication, which he describes as entirely his responsibility.

² The Report is available at <http://www.gov.sark.gg/>

"I did not uncover any conspiracy nor any corrupt practice.

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, I can only conclude that just 16 candidates being nominated was the result of happenstance.

No-one foresaw it.

No-one I spoke to believed it to be a good outcome.

It was not a good result for a healthy democracy." (Para 82)

However, Mr Knight said

"As the Independent Election Observer, I had to be concerned with whether this election was conducted within a healthy, active, participatory democracy. It would be arrogant and going well beyond the remit if my comments on this were presented as comprehensive or definitive.

But I did have the opportunity to take a snapshot and listen to the (widely differing) views of a significant proportion of the electorate. " (Para 75-76)

He continued:

"What really concerned me in nearly all the discussions I had with citizens – in public meetings, in small groups, in one-to-ones – was that their perceptions were overwhelmingly determined not by the merits or otherwise of the case, but on who was seen to be making the case.

It was as though nearly everyone had come to accept that each and every discussion and contribution had to be seen through, what I call, 'the Barclay prism'.

This is not indicative of a healthy democracy." (Para 90)

Mr Knight concluded:

"The government of Sark will have to take the leadership responsibility for securing a healthy local democracy. This is a significant challenge when, in many parts of the world, the democratic process is perceived sceptically.

But, it can change the democratic climate by changing its default option to transparency, being pro-active about communicating and engaging people in the debate about the key challenges facing Sark, and in developing its own guidance about declaring and avoiding conflicts of interest.

Similarly citizens – especially some influential citizens – can also play their part by concentrating debate and discussion on the merits of issues, rather than their perceptions about the individuals who are making them."

Ends.....

Howard Knight can be contacted via

howardknightsheffield@hotmail.com

(00) (44) 114 243 3936