

MINUTES OF THE MEETING OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION HELD ON 12 JUNE 2003 IN CARDIFF

Present: Sam Younger (SY) (Chair)
Pamela Gordon (PG)
Glyn Mathias (GM)
Karamjit Singh (KS)
Professor Graham Zellick (GZ)

In attendance: Roger Creedon (RC)
Jacqui Dixon (JD)
Roger Gough (RG)
Anne Hinds (AH)
Nicole Smith (NS)
Chris Welford (CW)
Kay Jenkins (KJ)
Kate Sullivan (KBS)
Paul Allen (PA)

Apologies: Sir Neil McIntosh

1. Minutes of the meeting held on 8 May 2003

1.1 The minutes of the Commission meeting held on 8 May 2003 were agreed.

1.2 The following matters arising were noted:

SY reported that he had visited Gibraltar to launch the consultation paper. A further visit would take place in week commencing 23 June 2003.

A seminar would be held in Cardiff to evaluate the organisation of the elections to the Welsh Assembly on 1 May 2003.

The Commissioners thanked NS and the Policy Unit for their work on 'Voting for Change', and the related reports, which had been successfully launched. SY had held meetings with key government figures. The Government were supportive of the need for legislation, and wished to be advised which issues the Commission considered to be most important.

SY had agreed with the change to the timetable on the Party Funding review; there would be one stage of consultation. A revised PID would be issued.

2. Northern Ireland Assembly Elections (Political Parties and Candidates) Reimbursement Scheme 2003

- 2.1 CW presented the report. The political parties and the NIO had been consulted, and the feedback was positive. A further draft of the scheme would be discussed at the Commissioner's private meeting on 27 June 2003; this further draft would include proposals for dispute resolution. Commissioners were invited to send any drafting points to CW.
- 2.2 RC advised that there were some unresolved legal issues. It was essential not to draft the scheme so as to fetter the discretion of the Secretary of State who makes the payments. Revisions were also required to the draft text to clarify how the Commission should exercise its judgement in determining applications. Particular reference was made to the drafting of the destruction certificates, which needed careful wording.
- 2.3 KS referred to the need to involve all political parties in the consultation process, and to make clear the exact role of the Commission. It had been decided that material will be received into the Commission's office in Belfast.
- 2.4 **The Commissioners noted the first draft of the scheme, and agreed that further consideration would be given at the meeting on 27 June 2003.**

3. PID: review of policy development grants

- 3.1 CW presented the proposal for the review. SY expressed concern that this review should not cut across the review of Party Funding which would be dealing with similar issues of scope and purpose. Consulting on both matters at the same time would be confusing. The proposed review of the PDGs should consider the narrower question of the distribution methodology.
- 3.2 **The Commissioners agreed the PID should be amended to limit the scope of the review to distribution methodology.**

4. GLA Election booklet

- 4.1 NS presented the report, and advised that the Minister had taken the view that the booklet should be delivered to every elector. All candidates would be required to contribute £10,000 towards the cost of printing as in 2000. The GLRO will meet most of the costs of production and the cost of delivery. This arrangement had been previously agreed by Parliament.
- 4.2 The Commissioners were concerned about the requirement to pay towards the production of the booklet, in addition to paying an election deposit of £10,000. They were also concerned about the possibility of the material for the booklet not being vetted for illegality. The Commissioners proposed amendments to the draft response.
- 4.3 **The Commissioners agreed the draft response to the consultation, subject to the amendments discussed.**

5. May 2003 Pilot Scheme Evaluation

- 5.1 KBS presented the report, and KBS and PA gave a presentation on the key findings of the evaluation, including the technical evaluation. The second draft of the report would be considered at the private meeting of the Commissioners on 27 June, followed by a further revision which would be sent out by e-mail to Commissioners for finalisation by 3 July 2003. The final report would be available on 31 July. KS declared an interest in the electronic pilot schemes, on the grounds that his son works for an IT company.
- 5.2 The Commissioners discussed the following issues which had arisen from the pilots:
- The use of barcodes
 - Security statements
 - Models for postal voting
 - Public information
 - Delivery points
 - Procurement of e-voting/e-counting systems
 - Quality assurance
 - Economies of scale
- 5.3 The preference was to allow local authorities the choice of all-postal voting for local elections. Whilst there would be consistency of approach if the decision was taken other than at local level, it was recognised that electoral services are a local service, and local authorities will want to take decisions at that level. As a longer term goal, the Commission would be positively encouraging local authorities to develop multi-channel voting systems for elections.
- 5.4 In making all-postal ballots more widely available, there was an important question as to whether, legally, the decision as to whether to hold an all-postal ballot should rest with the Returning Officer. The Commission could set out the criteria to be taken into account. However, the Commissioners were concerned about how this would work in practice, when the Returning Officer, who is usually the Chief Executive of the local authority, could not obtain all-party support for such a decision. Concern was also expressed about voters who found postal voting difficult. It was felt that the local authority would have to agree to a package of requirements in order to hold an all-postal vote, including the provision of staffed delivery points which would allow the option of supervised and assisted voting. There should be a strong suggestion in the report that this should be in place for 2004.
- 5.5 The strategic report would include a 'lay' overview of issues in relation to e-voting and e-counting and there would be a separate technical report on the e-voting and e-counting issues published only on the Commission website. There was concern that the QA had been commissioned too late by ODPM, and that some pilots had taken place outside the framework. The technology had not been proven, and it was still a long way from being ready to be used in a general election. The Commissioners agreed that the further information was helpful, but it must be made clear in the report that there was a significant difference in the stages of development of postal voting and electronic voting.

- 5.6 **The Commissioners noted the findings, and agreed the timetable for finalising and publishing the report.**

6. Annual Report 2003/4: draft format

- 6.1 JD presented the paper, which outlined the format for the Annual Report 2003/4. The first draft would be available for consideration by Commissioners in July 2003.
- 6.2 **The Commissioners noted the report.**

7. NIF quarterly update

- 7.1 NS presented the report. The Commissioners agreed that the format was satisfactory for the purpose, subject to the inclusion of the date on which the project was approved.
- 7.2 **The Commissioners noted the report and agreed the format, subject to addition of the date of approval of the project,**

8. Information items

- 8.1 The Commissioners received the following items for information:
- Referendums update (EC90/03)
 - Schedule of meetings and events (EC91/03)