

Minutes of the meeting of the Electoral Commission held on 31 August 2005, in London.

Present: Sam Younger (SY) (Chair)
Pamela Gordon (PG)
Glyn Mathias (GM)
Sir Neil McIntosh (NM)

In attendance: Peter Wardle (PW)
Jacqui Dixon (JD)
Roger Gough (RG)
Kay Jenkins (KJ)
Angela Salt (AS)
Nicole Smith (MS)
Kate Sullivan (KBS)
Rael Zackon (RZ)
Doug Stewart (DS)
Mike Harold (MH)
Ben Marshall (BM)
Tabitha Cunniffe (TB)

Apologies: Karamjit Singh

1. Electoral Administration Bill (EC109/05)

1.1 DS presented the report, which outlined the current position in respect of the Electoral Administration Bill, and highlighted two key issues for discussion:

- Individual registration
- Piloting

It was expected that the Bill would be introduced into Parliament on 11 October 2005.

1.2 DS referred to the letter sent to the Lord Chancellor concerning individual registration, and to the meeting which SY and PW attended with the Lord Chancellor and John Sills. A letter had been received from the DCA in reply, indicating that:

- The use of personal identifiers is considered a positive step
 - Nevertheless, Ministers have concerns about collecting personal identifiers and the effect on registration rates
- 1.3 The draft clauses in the Bill provide for the piloting of personal identifiers but not of individual registration; there was no commitment to individual registration. There was a limited proposal on pilots, which was lacking in detail. There was general agreement in the Commission that pilots of individual registration would not work, and in any event, there was already sufficient evidence from the Northern Ireland experience.
- 1.4 The Commission had taken a position on individual registration on principle, and this should not be abandoned. The Commissioners agreed that the possible problems arising from such a fundamental change should be acknowledged, and identified a number of mitigating factors and arguments, including:
- The continued need for a long-term campaign to encourage registration
 - The collective responsibility of Government, parties, the Commission and local authorities to tackle registration, and the resources to do so
 - Approaching the need for individual registration from the aspect of human rights and equality
 - The possibility of a phased roll-out of individual registration with adjustments along the way
 - The need for a public debate on individual registration, involving all stakeholders; it was noted, for example, that this should include individual local authorities as well as the LGA
 - The experience of Northern Ireland, and other countries, particularly Canada
 - The need for adequate funding of such a large scale change
- 1.5 The Commissioners also considered whether support for continuing postal voting on demand could be sustained, in the light of the lack of Government commitment on individual registration. This would be a logical step, but would go against public opinion. This would have to be considered further during the course of the Bill, but it was acknowledged that the Commission could not delay a decision for too long.
- 1.6 **The Commissioners agreed to maintain the current position on individual registration, and to review the situation, particularly in respect of postal voting on demand and pilots, as the Bill progresses.**

2. Understanding Electoral Registration (EC110/05)

- 2.1 DS introduced the presentation with reference to the research report which was due for publication on 6 September. The timing of the report would enable the research to inform the debate on individual registration. The presentation aimed to identify the key messages.
- 2.2 BM stated that the research had been designed and planned several years ago; this was the first research on this topic since 1993. A systematic check of the register had been carried out, and more evidence was now available than before. A model was being developed with ONS to do such research more regularly.
- 2.3 The research had shown that 8/9% of those eligible to vote were not on the register. This confirmed the need for reform and supported recommendations already published by the Commission.
- 2.4 **The Commissioners noted the research report, and the proposed presentation of the key messages arising from it.**

3. Matters for information

- 3.1 AS summarised the dates and arrangements for the publication/launch of:
 - Understanding electoral registration
 - Q2 donations
 - European Parliament Campaign expenditure
 - PER review consultation
 - Northern Ireland registration campaign