

Confirmed on 10 November 2005

Minutes of the meeting of the Electoral Commission held on 27 October 2005 in London

Present: Sam Younger (SY) (Chair)
Pamela Gordon (PG)
Sir Neil McIntosh (NM)
Karamjit Singh (KS)

In attendance: Peter Wardle (PW)
Jacqui Dixon (JD)
Roger Gough (RG)
Angela Salt (AS)
Nicole Smith (NS)
Rael Zackon (RZ)
Doug Stewart (DS)
Lisa Watch (LS)

Apologies: Glyn Mathias

1. The Commission's relationship with Government

- 1.1 NS gave a presentation on the Commission's relationship with government, both at Westminster and devolved governments. The presentation and subsequent discussion covered the following issues:
- The public understanding of the Commission's relationship with government, and the statutory framework the Commission operates under
 - Ministerial understanding of the Commission's status
 - The implications of devolution in recognising different relationships and different contexts
 - The Commission's role as an agent of change
 - Concerns about a joint campaign on registration and awareness for the 2006 London elections
 - The Commission's role as advisor to Parliament, along with the NAO
- 1.2 The Commissioners agreed that, on the most immediate issues, that of the 2006 London Borough Elections, the Commission's editorial decisions cannot be subject to veto by government. This was a different situation to that of the joint branding arrangement with the Scottish Executive, as the Executive has responsibility for Scottish local

authorities, and the Commission had retained editorial control. The Commissioners also noted that the Commission may be questioned on the Commission's contribution to the PSA target on public awareness.

1.3 **The Commissioners noted the issues raised by the presentation**

2. Measuring the Commission's successes

- 2.1 PW outlined the changes to the way in which the aim of the Commission, objectives and targets would be presented in the draft Corporate Plan, and explained the purpose of the draft targets. The draft Corporate Plan would be considered in November when there would be another opportunity to consider the targets.
- 2.2 The Commissioners suggested some amendments, including year-on-year comparisons and perceptions of independence. Concern was expressed about including targets on voting levels.
- 2.3 RG stated that the draft Corporate Plan would be considered at the meeting on 10 November 2005, and again on 8 December. No date has been set for the meeting of the Speaker's Committee. PW indicated that the Committee would consider a stocktake of the current situation, and funding for 2006/7 at the same time.
- 2.4 **The Commissioners noted the draft aim, objectives and targets to be included in the Corporate Plan, subject to the amendments discussed.**

3. Electoral Administration Bill

- 3.1 SY outlined the current position. The second reading debate took place on 25 October. The Constitutional Affairs Select Committee would meet on 2 November; a statement would be submitted as requested.
- 3.2 SY also reported on a meeting held the previous week with the Minister of State, particularly on the issues of pilots and individual registration. A meeting had also been held with Geoff Hoon concerning individual registration.
- 3.3 The Commissioners discussed the following matters arising from the Bill:
 - 3.3.1 *Select Committee hearing*

The Commissioners were concerned about the ability of pilot schemes at other than national level to provide evidence of the impact of individual registration on the registration levels. It would be possible to

phase introduction of individual registration to achieve a high level of registration with personal identifiers, and to limit postal votes to those with personal identifiers.

The Commissioners agreed that a brief summary paper should be prepared stating the Commission's current position on individual registration, with an emphasis on transitional arrangements. SY would speak to the Chairman, Alan Beith, prior to the meeting of the Select Committee.

3.3.2 *Deposits*

There are indications that the Government may withdraw the change to the deposit threshold. The Commission would not press the case for retention.

3.3.3 *Candidates expenses ('the four-month rule')*

The Commission's view on this was not fixed; it was for Parliament to determine what it wished to do.

3.3.4 *Deceased candidates*

SY had received a letter from the Minister of State concerning the Commission's response to Sir Patrick Cormack. The Government's proposals took on board the Commission's concerns and were aimed at minimising the circumstances which could lead to delayed elections. The Commissioners acknowledged that there were pragmatic considerations underlying the Minister's proposals and there was no advantage in continuing to press for further changes.

3.3.5 *Disapplication of Schedule 7*

The Commission would provide the Government (and the ODPM spokesman) with a summary of the arrangements which we believe should exist, but leave details to Government officials to develop.

3.3.6 *Funding of local campaigns by national parties*

The Commission has considered this issue, but would do so if necessary.

3.4 NS referred to the Regulatory Impact Assessment produced by the Government. The costs to the Commission of implementation as set out in the Assessment were unrealistic and the Government had now acknowledged that the RIA was not intended to cost the implications for the Commission. The cost to local government had been estimated at £30,000 per authority, which would be ring-fenced. PW stated that indicative budgets for communication around the Bill were £1m for the

new Commission responsibilities and £5m for increased public awareness.

- 3.5 **The Commissioners agreed the suggested arrangements for responding to the Government's proposals, and asked that a copy of the briefing paper on the Second Reading be circulated for their information.**

4. General Election 2005: media and campaigns report

- 4.1 The Commissioners suggested a number of changes to the text of the report, particularly to emphasise that this is a research report.
- 4.2 **The Commissioners noted the draft report, subject to the amendments proposed, and authorised SY to approve the final version for publication.**