

Rt. Hon. Nick Clegg MP
Deputy Prime Minister
Cabinet Office
70 Whitehall
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10 November 2010

Dear Mr Clegg,

**Referendum on the Parliamentary Voting System – Embargoed until 00.01
Thursday 11 November**

I am writing to you today to set out more of my emerging thinking about the delivery of various aspects of the proposed referendum on the Westminster Parliamentary voting system and to update you on some of the key activities that the Commission has been undertaking in preparation for the referendum. I would also welcome your views about the timing of the referendum count and the planned public awareness campaigns, more details on which can be found at the end of this letter.

When the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies (PVSC) Bill was published in the Westminster Parliament, in July 2010, the Commission made clear its view that it should be possible to deliver the different polls proposed if the key practical risks to the successful conduct of the scheduled elections and a UK-wide referendum are properly managed.

- The Government must support the Commission in putting in place a robust process to ensure that planning for 5 May 2011, across the whole of the UK, takes full account of the implications of the different polls due to take place on that date.
- The rules on how the referendum will be conducted must be clear from at least six months in advance.
- The legal framework for the referendum must make provision for formal combination of the referendum poll with the scheduled elections.
- Adequate provision must be made for appropriate public awareness activities to support understanding of the elections and referendum processes by voters.
- Appropriate levels of funding must be made available for the delivery of the referendum and the scheduled elections together.

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Now that we are less than 6 months away from 5 May 2011, I thought it might be helpful if I set out the Commission's current view of progress towards addressing those risks and have, therefore, addressed them in turn in the Annex to this letter.

Preparations are currently on track for the proposed referendum and scheduled elections on 5 May next year but it will still be a significant challenge to make sure they are well run.

Ultimately it is for the UK Parliament to decide whether the proposed referendum goes ahead, but as the Bill stands having passed through the Commons, enough progress has been made against the risks we set out to allow the different polls on 5 May to be run smoothly. The Bill has now passed to the House of Lords for their consideration, and we will continue to monitor its progress.

But delivering well-run polls on 5 May will be a major challenge and it is important that local authorities have the right resources and staff in place to do this. Some members of the Steering Group, which we have set-up, have highlighted the risks that could arise from the pressure local authorities are under between now and 5 May. The Commission, the Chief Counting Officer and the Regional Counting Officers for the referendum will be monitoring the position closely and will make clear if at any point it thinks that this will significantly affect the delivery of the polls

Timing of the Referendum Count

I would also like to take this opportunity to set out my thoughts on the timing of the referendum count and, to this end, have enclosed a paper that sets out my preferred option and the principles and assumptions which underpin this decision. I am minded to direct Counting Officers to begin the counting of the votes for the referendum from 4pm on Friday 6 May 2011 but would welcome your views on this matter before making my final decision. Further detailed planning work will be undertaken once a final decision is made to give broadcasters and others a better sense of when to expect the results.

Public Awareness Campaigns

I have also included, for your information, a paper on the Commission's plans for running public awareness campaigns next year. The Commission will run two public awareness campaigns in spring 2011. The first will be ahead of the referendum on the powers of the National Assembly for Wales scheduled for March. The second will be ahead of the devolved and local elections and the proposed referendum on the UK Parliamentary voting system scheduled for May. The campaigns will provide information on the events and how voters can take part in them. The campaigns will target all eligible voters.

Grants to Designated Organisations

As I'm sure you are aware, the Electoral Commission may designate one permitted participant to represent each outcome of a referendum. Designated organisations will be entitled to receive equal grants of up to £600,000 from the Commission. These grants are provided to ensure a minimum level of campaign activity on each side. Designated organisations are also provided with free facilities similar to those provided to political parties at elections. These include the delivery of a referendum address to each household in the referendum area, the provision of free broadcasts and the use of public buildings for holding public meetings.

Following the proposals set out in our principles paper published earlier this year, which you should have received at the time and is available on our website - <http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/elections/referendums/our-role-and-responsibilities> - we have concluded that we will set the grant for each designated organisation at the UK Parliamentary voting system referendum on the basis of fixed costs of £70,000, plus variable costs of £28,000 for every week of the referendum period. As the referendum period is not due to begin until the Bill receives Royal Assent, we are not currently in a position to calculate the final grant value.

Guidance to Campaigners

Finally, I thought you might be interested to know that the Commission has now published its initial guidance to campaigners, which can be found on our website - <https://admin.electoralcommission.org.uk/guidance/resources-for-those-we-regulate/campaigners-in-referendums>. This is a longer document so I have refrained from enclosing it with this letter. If, however, you would like a hard copy, please do not hesitate to contact me. We will issue final guidance early in 2011, once the legislation has been finalised, and will continue to provide campaigners' updates by email on significant provisions of the PVSC Bill as it continues its passage through Parliament.

I do hope you find this information useful and would ask that if you have any views on the timing of the count or comments on the public awareness campaign, that you let me know **by 25 November 2010** so that I can take your views into account before I make my final decision.



Jenny Watson
Chair, The Electoral Commission
Chief Counting Officer