

Minutes of the meeting of the Electoral Commission held on Tuesday 1 February 2011 at 10.00 am

Present:

Henrietta Campbell) by tele-conference
David Howarth (DH)
Tony Hobman (TH)
Ian Kelsall (IK)) by video-conference
John McCormick (JMcC)) by tele-conference
Lord Kennedy of Southwark (RK)
George Reid (GR)

In attendance:

Peter Wardle (PW)
Carolyn Hughes (CH)
Lisa Klein (LK)
Alex Robertson (AR)
Bob Posner (BP)
Kairen Zonena (KZ)
Joel Blackwell (JB)
Kay Jenkins (KJ)
Clinton Proud (CP)

Tony Hobman in the Chair

1 Apologies

Jenny Watson and Max Caller (who had excluded themselves from the meeting) and Baroness Browning.

2 Declaration of Interests

- 2.1 IK declared that he had been Director for CBI Wales during the 1979 Wales Referendum and that CBI Wales had supported the 'no' campaign.

2.2 RK declared that as a member of a political party he had been involved in the referendum for the introduction of Welsh devolution in 1997.

3 2011 Wales referendum – voter information (EC 11/11)

3.1 As agreed by the Commission Board at its meeting on 25 January, a paper was drawn up to enable the Board to consider the views of registered campaigners on options for the Commission to help voters find information about arguments for each answer to the referendum question and to take a decision on the options.

3.2 JW and MC, as Chief Counting Officer and Deputy Chief Counting Officer, had withdrawn from the meeting on 25 January. This was done to provide an assurance of complete separation between their statutory role in the Referendum, and the Commission's role of raising voter awareness of the arguments. In keeping with that decision, they also excluded themselves from the circulation of the Board paper to Commissioners, or discussion of it prior to decision, and from attending this meeting and participating in the final decision.

3.3 The paper had been circulated to Commissioners by email on 28 January 2011. The Board reiterated that it was considering its decision on the specific circumstances of the Wales referendum. Commissioners considered that their priority was to facilitate voter access to the arguments for each answer to the referendum question. There was agreement about the merits of offering an opportunity to all registered campaigners to provide a link on their site on aboutmyvote. In going on to discuss the issue of whether additionally to offer all campaigners the opportunity also to provide a brief statement of their views for inclusion on the aboutmyvote website, Commissioners took into consideration the evidence of low public awareness of the referendum issue in Wales; the need to put voters' interests at the heart of what we do; and the desire of the Commission to do as much as it could to facilitate voters' access to the arguments, consistent with maintaining its impartiality and independence. The Board noted that there had been no principled objections to the Commission providing access to the arguments of campaigners for each answer to the referendum question, although there had been different preferences as to the mechanism used to do that. The Board agreed, in offering registered campaigners the option of providing a website link and a short statement, that the Commission should make clear on its website that the option was available to all registered campaigners (whether or not they chose to use it). The Board noted the importance of there being a disclaimer on the Commission website making it clear that campaigner statement information was the campaigner's views and not endorsed by the Commission as an independent body. The Board also asked that a copy of the guidelines to campaigners about their statements should be published alongside the statements on the website.

Agreed: That:-

- (a) the views received from registered campaigners on the options proposed and set out in the paper be noted; and
- (b) registered campaigners be offered the option of placing on the Commission's website: either or both, as they prefer, (in accordance with the arrangements and conditions set out in the paper):
 - Links to their websites
 - The opportunity to provide a statement of up to 200 words.

The meeting ended at 10.25 am.

Tony Hobman, Chair pro tem