

# The Electoral Commission

Mark Harper MP  
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*Dear Mark*

Further to our discussions before Christmas regarding my concerns about the tightness of the legislative timetable for the Parliamentary Voting System and Constituencies (PVSC) Bill, I wanted to share with you a schedule that we have collated, which highlights the key dates and milestones that must be met between Royal Assent to polling day in order for the Electoral Commission to successfully deliver our key responsibilities in relation to the referendum on the Government's preferred date of 5 May 2011. The timetable is enclosed with this letter.

We have produced this timetable to show some of the key milestones based on the latest possible date for Royal Assent for a 5 May poll. As currently set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA) 2000, the minimum referendum period is 10 weeks from the date of Royal Assent, which in this case would be 24 February 2011. However, in practice, the last day for Royal Assent will need to be 16 February, due to the Parliamentary half term recess. It would be remiss of me not to share with you my strong concerns as to the tightness of the remaining timetable.

As you will be aware, the briefing papers that we have issued at every stage of the PVSC Bill have said that, providing the Bill receives Royal Assent in sufficient time to allow a referendum period of at least 10 weeks before the poll, there will be adequate time to register campaigners and designate lead campaign organisations, so that they can put their arguments to voters.

A referendum period of less than 10 weeks would not provide enough time for this to happen and will also allow less time for campaigners to make their case. It is also important that designated lead campaigners are able to make proper use of the publicly

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funded assistance that will be made available to them, including rights to free mailings and referendum broadcasts.

We have tried to build an open and collaborative relationship with both Houses of Parliament during the passage of the Bill, and we have found the scrutiny of this legislation – as other Bills – valuable. I would not want to be perceived as seeking to limit the opportunity for such scrutiny. But I think it is right that Parliamentarians understand the work that is yet to come.

Therefore, we plan to circulate this timetable with our next briefing on the Bill to all members of the House of Lords, and the frontbench teams in the Commons, in the next few days so that they can be fully aware of the key milestones when debating the final stages of the Bill. We also plan to send it to the Political and Constitutional Reform Select Committee.

I do hope you find this information useful; if you would like to discuss our assumptions in any more detail please do not hesitate to contact my office.

*With best wishes, as ever*



**Jenny Watson**  
Chair

Key dates for a 5 May 2011 referendum if Royal Assent is on 16 February (dates will change if Royal Assent is on a different day)

Key dates in 2011	Milestone
<b>February 16</b>	<b>Last day for Royal Assent for a 5 May referendum (Because leaving until after Parliamentary recess would not allow 10 weeks for a Referendum Period)</b> Opening date for application to be Designated Organisations
<b>March 15</b>	Closing date for applications to be Designated Organisations
<b>March 18</b>	Earliest possible date for Electoral Commission to designate Yes/No organisations (if all the applications are received early on in the application period, otherwise the earliest possible date will be 24 March)
<b>March 25</b>	Electoral Commission public information campaign begins in Northern Ireland
<b>March 28</b>	Electoral Commission public information booklet distribution begins in Northern Ireland
<b>March 29</b>	Latest date for designation of Yes/No organisations (if designation decision is more complex)
<b>April 1</b>	Northern Ireland booklet distribution ends Electoral Commission public awareness campaign begins in GB
<b>April 4</b>	Electoral Commission booklet distribution begins in GB
<b>April 8</b>	Great Britain booklet distribution ends
<b>April 11</b>	Last date to register for an absent vote in Northern Ireland
<b>April 14</b>	Last date to register to vote in England, Wales and Northern Ireland After 5pm first postal votes can be delivered to electors in GB
<b>April 15</b>	Last date to register to vote in Scotland
<b>April 18</b>	Completion of first issue of postal votes across UK (expected CCO direction for Counting Officers)
<b>May 5</b>	<b>Polling day</b>