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## Putting Voters First

I'm very pleased to have this chance to speak at the 2009 National Elections Conference.

### Fundamentals

Alfred Smith, who was governor of New York between the wars, once said "It's not the voting that's democracy, it's the counting." In fact, of course, you can't have one without the other. But without the dedication and hard work of Returning Officers, Electoral Registration Officers and electoral services staff across the country, voters wouldn't be able to make their votes count. The work that everyone in this room does is fundamental to democracy.

And the title and theme of my talk today emphasises that in carrying out our roles, we must never forget the importance of putting voters first.

I want to take the opportunity as we look ahead today to the June elections – and indeed the next Westminster General Election, which will not be far off – to reflect on what we all do, and how we can move forward together.

I'll look first at how we run elections.

It's a basic right of the people of the United Kingdom to say who governs them. They have the right to vote in secret, for who they want, in a way that is easy for them, and to know that their vote counts.

They also expect voter registration and the election itself to be run to high standards of ethics and service delivery.

So, what are the hallmarks of an electoral process that puts voters first?

- The boundaries on which elections are conducted should be clear and fair.
- The process for registering to vote should be secure, but also easy to understand and complete.
- The mechanics of voting should be sufficiently straightforward that anyone who is registered can vote. Ballot papers and other material should show voters clearly and unambiguously what their choices are. Voters should be confident that their vote will be kept secret, and that their vote will count.

- And election results should be clear and should be accepted by the voters. They should be announced as soon after the poll as possible, so voters know who has won - but without compromising the accuracy of the result.

I would also add that voters expect a similar level of service, wherever they happen to live.

## Roles and responsibilities

We each have our own important parts to play in delivering all this.

The Government and Parliament set the policy framework in which elections are conducted.

The Electoral Commission provides guidance; sets standards; and monitors performance.

The Commission, through the Boundary Committee for England, also sets boundaries for local government in England. There's a Bill before Parliament which will move this role to a new, independent body. The Commission supports this move, as long as the transfer is smoothly managed and the new arrangements ensure that decision-making on boundaries continues to be independent.

And Returning Officers, Electoral Registration Officers and electoral services staff – all of you who are involved in the day-to-day running of the electoral process - have to make sure the whole thing works; that the end product meets voters' expectations.

We all need to make sure that in doing our jobs, we don't put up unnecessary hurdles that discourage or prevent people from voting.

## Political Parties and candidates

So, if we do our jobs by providing a system that is convenient, secure and easy to understand - what will make voters go the ballot box?

Well, the most important thing of course is that people need to see that their vote will make a difference – to see the choices and the policies that face them.

And that is the prime responsibility of candidates and political parties. They too have high expectations of the electoral process, and they every right to be demanding. Elections are their opportunity to present the choices they offer to voters, and give them reasons to vote. And making it possible for them to do that effectively is another vital part of running elections. At the Electoral Commission:

- We're very conscious indeed that without effective political parties and candidates, politics can't get off first base.
- We're very conscious that the vast majority of those who get involved with election campaigns are volunteers – they do it because they care, and they do it on top of all their other commitments.
- And we're very conscious that not everyone who gets involved in politics does so through a political party – 10 per cent of the councillors elected in England and Wales are independents.

It's worth pausing to consider what candidates and parties expect from us at election time.

- They expect and deserve clear, timely and easily accessible information about how to take part, and the rules they need to follow. There are plenty of good examples of this around, especially where Returning Officers make sure that likely candidates have the chance to get briefed well in advance of elections.
- And they expect and deserve a transparent process, open to scrutiny. In practice, that means consistent application of the rules, with a clear mechanism for sorting out any problems; and accurate results.

## Money & Politics

Voters also need to have confidence that parties and candidates are committed to transparency about where they get their money from, and how they spend it. One key reason for setting up an Electoral Commission in the United Kingdom was to address the sort of concerns set out by Lord Neill in 1998, when he said :

'Many members of the public believe that the policies of the major political parties have been influenced by large donors, while ignorance about the sources of funding has fostered suspicion. We are, therefore, convinced that a fundamentally new framework is needed to restore public confidence.'

The Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act in 2000 marked a very substantial reform of party finance.

Eight years on, what was then unprecedented transparency is taken almost for granted. There is vastly more information in the public domain now than there ever was before.

Since the Act came into effect, the Electoral Commission has published details of nearly 21 thousand separate donations to political parties – more than 300 million pounds in total. More than 60 per cent of people agree that there's more information available now about how parties are funded, and how they spend their money.

The Commission spends a good deal of time reminding people about the rules on transparency and dealing with instances of non-compliance. Another Bill - the Political Parties and Elections Bill – will bring further changes to the framework for regulating political finance.

It proposes to give the Electoral Commission an investigatory role which is similar to that of other regulators, together with a more flexible and proportionate range of sanctions. So over the next year or so we expect to be increasing our work with candidates and parties to make sure they understand the new framework and how it will affect them.

## Progress so far

So, if that's where we want to be - how do we measure up?

A recent survey suggests that 3 out of 4 people across the country are satisfied with the actual process of voting. But at the same time, 1 in 3 say they think fraud remains a problem at election time, and their concerns continue to centre around postal voting. For me, that suggests that there's work still to do.

But there has been a lot of progress in recent years.

For our part, the Electoral Commission has worked hard to support improvements in the consistency and quality of elections management through talking to people involved at all levels in electoral administration, as well as to candidates, parties and voters - and producing a wide range of advice and guidance based on what we've found.

We've also pushed for changes we believe are needed to make the system work better for voters - often with your support, and usually with success; although I'll return later to some important pieces of unfinished business.

## Performance standards

I think one of the most important recent developments is the introduction of performance standards. The Commission has had an excellent response from local authorities as we've worked with you to collect information and set standards which are going to be meaningful and which will help you show how you are delivering better electoral services.

2009 will be the first year where we are able to report on a full year's performance in the field of electoral registration. We publish the results in a couple of months' time; we hope when you look at them you'll be able to reflect on progress made.

And we will see performance standards for elections management in force for the first time at the June elections.

If you are a Returning Officer or Electoral Registration Officer, and not already familiar with the standards, please find time among the many other things you have to do to bring yourself up to speed with them. There'll be a strong new focus on your individual performance in making sure these standards are met.

## Absent votes

Just before the Electoral Commission was set up, Parliament introduced postal voting on demand in Great Britain. It's proved increasingly popular – 15 per cent of electors were issued with a postal vote at the local elections in England last year.

The Commission has consistently called for the security arrangements around absent votes to be tightened, and in 2006 we saw the introduction of personal identifiers which must be checked.

We think the statutory requirement to check a minimum of 20 per cent of personal identifiers is too low; it should be 100 per cent to provide proper reassurance to voters and candidates that the process is secure.

And very many Returning Officers agree. Although when the procedures were first implemented, in 2007, a lot of Returning Officers struggled to check more than 20 per cent of identifiers, in 2008 almost everyone managed to check 100 per cent. The key to last year's success was good preparation and planning – so I urge you all to make sure that you are making your arrangements now to check all the identifiers at the June elections. And we have called on the Government to make sure resources are there to support 100 per cent checks.

## Fraud

Alongside this, the Electoral Commission has for a number of years been working with Returning Officers; Electoral Registration Officers; political parties; the Royal Mail; the police; and prosecutors, to make sure we do everything we can to promote and protect the integrity of our electoral system – aiming to prevent fraud so that people can be reassured that their vote is secure.

Please get involved in this as much as you can. In 2009 there will regional seminars across Great Britain. The more you can contribute to these events, sharing knowledge and best practice, the better and more secure the service for voters.

As in previous years, there will be training and pocket guides for the police, and officers in every police force in Great Britain who will act as the single contact point for dealing with electoral fraud issues. And the Commission will be providing pocket guides on postal voting for candidates, party workers and Royal Mail staff.

## Public awareness

One thing the Electoral Commission is uniquely placed to do at national level, with corresponding economies of scale, is to run high-profile advertising campaigns to encourage people to register to vote, and make sure they understand how to vote.

Around 90 thousand people register to vote each year in response to the Commission's annual mailing to home movers alone; and during the 2008 elections some 150 thousand people requested or downloaded a registration form.

Our new performance standards also encourage campaigns at local authority and regional level to increase registration and ensure that people know how to cast their vote. So alongside our national work, you have an important role in ensuring the delivery of effective local campaigns.

## Beyond June

So - if that is where we are now, what about the agenda beyond June?

Change to our elections framework has always been gradual, from the Great Reform Act of 1832, through the progressive extension of the franchise, to the 2006 Electoral Administration Act.

But we're still trying to run elections in the 21<sup>st</sup> century with structures that are essentially inherited from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

And we've seen additional complexity in the last ten years.

Apart from the introduction of postal voting on demand, which for many Returning Officers means they are essentially running two elections alongside each other, devolution means that across the United Kingdom we vote more often, and use a much more complex range of different voting systems – first-past-the-post is, of course, now used only for elections to the Parliament at Westminster and to English and Welsh local authorities.

## Electoral Management Boards

It may well be true that we wouldn't have started from here. But the challenge is to decide how to move forward without losing everything that already works well.

The Electoral Commission reported last summer on the outcome of a valuable consultation process with input from across the electoral community and the world of politics. We said we still need to be very clear about who is responsible for what in the electoral process:

- Policy and legislation is for Government and Parliament

- Managing the process is for Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers
- and our role in the Electoral Commission is to set standards and report on performance.

And we said that in discharging their role of managing the electoral process, Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers need to co-ordinate better, not act in isolation – not only to ensure that elections are delivered consistently, but also to make their collective voice heard by the Government and Parliament, by the Electoral Commission and by the voters.

We've proposed creating Electoral Management Boards, each led by a Returning Officer, with powers of direction, who is elected by the members of the Board.

We've seen some good progress in response to our proposal, not least in Scotland.

Meanwhile, the forums set up by Regional Returning Officers for the European elections in June are an example of how you could use such a framework to co-ordinate standards and approaches across a region and between regions. We hope they will provide a model that can be developed to create permanent Electoral Management Boards which will help deliver improved service for voters at every election.

But all this will only work in practice with the support of the electoral community, and especially of Returning Officers and Electoral Registration Officers. It won't happen otherwise. And if it doesn't, the Commission has said that we will need to look again at alternative ways of achieving the improvements in consistency and co-ordination that we want to see.

## The Government's role

We're also clear about things the Government needs to take on board to ensure a clear policy framework, and that elections managers have the resources they need to do their job.

We've said that no changes to legislation that affects the administration of elections should take effect later than six months before an election. Beyond that, we continue to call for simpler electoral law. 35 pieces of primary legislation relating to elections have been passed since 1998; there remains a pressing case for consolidation.

And we continue to monitor the level of resources available for electoral administration; we want to see adequate resources getting to the front line of elections management where they're needed.

Looking to the future, we hope the Government will work with the electoral community on a strategy for modernising our electoral system. Voters now

expect some choice about the mechanisms they use to vote, and say voting should be made easier as far as technology and security considerations allow.

But a strategy for modernising our electoral system needs to go well beyond continuing with a fairly random pattern of voluntary and small-scale e-voting pilots. We first need to take a step back and resolve some fundamental questions about the system itself.

## Registration

And that should start with registration.

Registering by household was introduced in a different era. And it belongs in a different era. It's not right in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for our democratic process to be founded on a system where someone called 'head of the household' can influence who else gets the vote.

Only a proper system of individual voter registration and personal identifiers will provide a system that's robust enough to allow us to harness technology to make voting more straightforward and accessible, without compromising voters' confidence that the process is secure. The electoral register is the bedrock for the rest of the system.

The Electoral Commission's been calling for this change for more than 5 years - since 2003. We're not alone – we've been joined by the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe; the Committee on Standards in Public Life; the Joseph Rowntree Reform Trust; and the judge who heard the petitions in Birmingham and Slough. All of them support a change to individual registration. And the most recent survey of public attitudes by the Committee on Standards in Public Life found that nearly two-thirds of the people they spoke to seem to favour a move to individual registration.

The front benches of the main political parties at Westminster all now support it.

The Government says it supports individual registration in principle, but has so far opposed attempts to legislate for the change.

The Commission believes we need early legislation to allow sufficient time for planning and preparation ahead of implementation.

In Northern Ireland, individual registration has been a success. But there are important lessons that we need to learn when we make the change in Great Britain.

For example, we know why some people dropped off the Northern Ireland register when the system there changed. Some people didn't know about the change, or found the paperwork difficult to complete.

And non-registration was higher in some socio-economic groups and among people who weren't engaged in the political process.

When we do come to change the registration system in Great Britain, clearly we'll have to work hard to address these concerns. We'll need serious public information campaigns. And there's a strong case for doing things that were not done in Northern Ireland at the time of the change – including providing some form of carry-forward, and picking up other data that will help registration officers target their efforts on hard-to-reach groups.

But my message is that until we address registration, which lies at the heart of the system, it's going to be hard to do much more to modernise the rest of our elections.

## Conclusion

I'll end by returning to my central theme.

We all need to put the interest of voters first in everything we do - and not be afraid to challenge where we believe standards fall short. Every part of the electoral process should be as convenient, secure and easy to understand for voters – and candidates - as we are able to make it.

Our next big opportunity to demonstrate the high standards of service we offer voters is at the June elections.

- They'll be the first elections with performance standards for elections management in force – please make sure you and your teams understand them, and are ready to deliver.
- Work closely with the police and your local parties to discourage, detect and deal with fraud.
- Plan now to check 100 per cent of personal identifiers for absent votes – we know from our experience in 2007 and 2008 that it won't be possible without early preparation and planning.
- And do all you can to encourage registration at local and regional level. No one likes having to turn someone away when they come to vote.

To help move longer-term reform forward, we need you to engage with the debate about Electoral Management Boards. We want to build on the experience of co-ordinating at regional level for the European elections.

And for Government and the political parties, I hope 2009 is the year we finally take firm steps towards introducing individual registration.

We will keep arguing – I hope with your support – for the changes we believe are needed to make sure the interests of voters are always put first.

Thank you.