

Minutes of the meeting of Parliamentary Parties Panel held on Tuesday 16 February 2010, London

Present:

Labour Party:	Melanie Onn Margaret Lynch
Liberal Democrats:	David Allworthy
Conservative Party:	Alan Mabbutt (in Chair) Andy Stedman
Plaid Cymru:	Rhian Medi-Roberts
SNP:	Scott Martin
Royal Mail:	Rachel Winham, Partnership Director
The Electoral Commission:	Peter Wardle Lisa Klein Andrew Scallan Stephen Rooney Kay Jenkins Tony Stafford Kate Brightwell

Apologies:

David Simpson (Conservatives)
Simon Day (Conservatives)

1 Minutes of the meeting (ECPPP 13/10/09)

- 1.1 The panel agreed the minutes of the meeting held on 13 October 2009. It was clarified that the formal PPP meeting began at 12.30 after the discussion with party General Secretaries and Chief Executives and the Commission Chair.

2 Royal Mail

- 2.1 Rachel Winham (RW), Partnership Director from Royal Mail gave an overview of arrangements for the forthcoming UK general election. RW explained the new software which will be available to political parties will mean that the print runs and walk packs will be sorted by walk order rather than street. Royal Mail has been working with the Ministry of Justice and political parties to develop the programme.
- 2.2 RW also explained that a helpline is being set up and will be available 24-7 during the election for political parties. The Royal Mail has also assigned an account manager to provide training to users of the new software and a local operational manager will be on hand for day to day queries.
- 2.3 RW also told the panel that the number of delivery points and drop off points in constituencies would be with the political parties by the end of the week.
- 2.4 David Allworthy (DA) said his main concern was that the Ministry of Justice has told parties that they will not be allowed to keep the old system and must use the new programme. He said this made things very difficult as parties have planned and budgeted using the old system.
- 2.5 Scott Martin (SM) asked what the differences were between the two programmes. RW said that Richard, her colleague from Royal Mail would meet with the SNP to talk through the technical differences.
- 2.6 RW said that the new system would be better and that Royal Mail are prepared to deal with any problems that arise and hopes that the programme will make things easier and cheaper for parties.
- 2.7 Alan Mabbutt (AM) said he was concerned how the new programme would affect volunteers. He also raised the issue of the need for consistency in how addresses are entered into fields on the programme and about the lack of postcodes which caused problems in the past.
- 2.8 AS said that the Secretary of State for Justice had issued a direction that the address format needed to be consistent by last year. The Ministry of Justice wrote to the Commission and asked it to evaluate progress, the Commission is considering whether to do this as it is not in its current work plan.
- 2.9 Melanie Onn (MO) asked RW about some ongoing correspondence between the Labour party and Royal Mail regarding the vetting of printed

material. RW said that she would be replying shortly. This issue may also need to be picked up with the Ministry of Justice.

2.10 MO also asked if the Royal Mail had been working with Local Authorities on vetting materials and RW said this was something she was discussing with Paul Docker at the Ministry of Justice.

2.11 RW explained about the vetting of candidate election material which Royal Mail undertakes at European and Parliamentary elections and how it had been agreed to proceed for the UK general election.

2.12 AM asked what the Commission's view was of vetting. Andrew Scallan (AS) said that the issue was discussed at the last Integrity roundtable and is an issue that will be included in the election report for the UK general election. AS said that the Commission is keen to know the views and experiences of the parties for the report.

2.13 AM raised the issue of how vetting impacts on party campaign expenditure if leaflets are pulled etc. Peter Wardle (PW) said the issue raises difficult questions - vetting is unusual as it provides the backstop of an external body (Royal Mail) checking mailings. RW explained that in the past vetting had not been consistent which is why it is done centrally now.

2.14 AM raised the issue that some candidates will be running in both local and general elections and if candidates are using one leaflet to promote themselves in both elections. RW said that guidance sets out what will be freepost and that everything else will be charged. PW said that the Ministry of Justice needs to be clear about what it is paying for, and what is not covered.

2.15 DA also made the point that the timetable for petitioning is not suitable for this issue and needs to be reviewed and changed for future elections.

3 Arrangements for the publication of donations and loans for Q1 2010 and weekly reporting during the general election

3.1 Lisa Klein (LK) said that Q1 donations (Jan to Mar) are to be with the Commission by the end of April. The Commission usually publishes this information on its website within 20 days of receipt. However, in the interest of transparency, the Commission will be publishing Q1 donations and loans information before the start of the local and possible general election, and is therefore planning to publish on Tuesday 4 May. LK

explained that, in order for this to happen, Commission staff will work over the weekend and parties will only have a few hours instead of the usual 48 hours to review, on the Monday 3 May. The Commission will also not be carrying out permissibility checks on Q1 reports, as it usually does, before they are published on the Commission website. These checks will be done subsequently.

- 3.2 With regard to weekly reporting during the general election, LK explained that this will commence on the day the election is called, with the first report due 7 days later. The Commission will publish the reports on its website within one day of receipt, but will not be doing permissibility checks. Stephen Rooney (SR) said that the Commission would be making this point clear in press releases and will explain in greater detail to journalists, to avoid any confusion about the status of donations.
- 3.3 LK said that the Commission would be setting out the arrangements in more detail shortly.

4 Commission approach to Referendums

- 4.1 Kay Jenkins, (KJ) gave a short presentation setting out the role and key principles of the Commission in relation to referendums. She spoke about how the Commission has recently reviewed how it would assess a referendum question and what its preferred approach would be, and thanked the parties for their feedback on this.
- 4.2 Following the presentation, the panel asked various questions regarding how spending limits would be determined for referendums that were not UK-wide. KJ explained that these limits would be prescribed in secondary legislation by the relevant Secretary of State, who must have regard to the Commission's views.
- 4.3 KJ said that the Commission called for legislation that provides for aggregation of spending limits for permitted participants who operate to a common plan. This was to prevent permitted participants circumventing spending limits by registering separately but acting together. Tony Stafford (TS) explained that an amendment to the Constitutional Reform and Governance Bill sought to address this issue.
- 4.4 Rhian Medi-Roberts (RMR) said that parties in Wales were likely to work together in a referendum on further powers for the Assembly. KJ explained that it was possible for parties to work together, along with other campaigners, through an umbrella organisation established for the purpose.
- 4.5 Answering questions, KJ explained the Commission's role in designating the lead organisations for the "yes" and "no" campaign from permitted

participants who apply for that status. The Commission would publish applications and give reasons for its decisions. KJ clarified that the Commission is required to designate both sides or not at all.

- 4.6 Margaret Lynch (ML) asked what the difference was between the designated lead organisations and those working to a common plan. Tony Stafford (TS) explained that the legislation was designed to encourage campaigning through umbrella organisations, but political parties and other organisations or individuals could choose to campaign as separate permitted participants if that was preferred. The lead organisation would have access to higher campaign spending limits, grants from the Commission, and other entitlements such as referendum broadcasts.
- 4.7 DA raised the point that it may be difficult if parties could not agree to campaign for either a yes or no outcome, which is something that those registering as permitted participants have to declare. Peter Wardle (PW) said that there was no reason that activists within parties could not support different campaigns if the party itself did not register to become a permitted participant.
- 4.8 The issue of public awareness was raised. KJ explained that the designation leads would be the primary provider of public awareness information about the yes and no arguments. In the example of Wales, if no designation was made, legislation enabled the Commission to provide public information on the arguments for and against.
- 4.9 ML asked what the franchise would be in an election. KJ explained that for a referendum it would be determined by the relevant legislation. In the case of Wales, this was the Assembly election franchise, that is, the local government register. Counting areas were local authority areas. If a referendum was combined with a devolved or general election, however, it would be logical to base count areas on constituencies.
- 4.10 DA raised concerns about the complexities of combining a referendum with another election and the difficulty for candidates to keep the views on both separate for campaign expenditure purposes. PW said the Commission was alive to this issue and was aware how parties felt about it. KJ said that this point reinforced the need for any proposal for combination to be considered on a case by case basis.

5 Individual electoral registration

- 5.1 ML asked how the implementation of individual electoral registration (IER) was progressing. AS said that it was best to ask the Ministry of Justice directly about the progress on the implementation of the policy,

as it is a Government programme. The Commission's role is to comment on progress and to ensure that it is implemented properly. PW now sits on the Programme Board for the project. PW said that he would recommend to the Ministry of Justice that they update political parties about IER.

- 5.2 AS also said that although the Ministry of Justice plans to delay the introduction of the voluntary phase until 2011, this will not necessarily effect the end date for introduction in 2015.
- 5.3 ML asked what work had been done around data protection and if the Information Commissioner had been consulted. AS explained that the legislation stipulates that the Information Commission must be consulted in the implementation of IER and that the Ministry of Justice was looking to start data matching pilots.

6 Commission report

- 6.1 Commenting on the Commission Report ML said that she was supportive of the Commission's approach to policy development grants. LK said that parties would be hearing from the Commission on this subject shortly.
- 6.2 Regarding the monitoring of the general election campaign AM asked if the Commission would be looking into social media. LK said that the Commission would be monitoring social media during the campaign and this reflected that social media is now being widely used by parties and candidates. ML asked if social media would be an aspect of reporting expenditure return. PW said that the Commission would work to its guidance and if evidence shows that the guidance does not fully address the issue, the Commission will seek to address this.

7 Dates of 2010

- 7.1 The next meeting will take place on Tuesday 15 June at 11am. (Labour to chair).