

evidence

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**REVIEW OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION ISSUES
AND QUESTIONS PAPER**

DISABILITY ACTION'S RESPONSE

APRIL 2006

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INTRODUCTION

- 1** Disability Action is a pioneering Northern Ireland charity, working with and for people with disabilities. We work with our members to provide information, training, transport, awareness programmes and representation for people regardless of their disability; whether that is a physical, mental health, sensory, hidden or learning disability.
- 2** More than one in five (300,000) people in Northern Ireland has a disability and the incidence is higher here than in the rest of the United Kingdom. Over one quarter of all families here are affected.
- 3** As a campaigning body, we work to bring about positive change to the social, economic and cultural life of people with disabilities and consequently our entire community.
- 4** Our range of services is provided from a network of 5 local offices, with 85 staff and 250 volunteers.
- 5** Disability Action welcomes the opportunity to respond to this draft and to aid our response has put the relevant page/paragraph of the draft in brackets at the end of our comments.

SPECIFIC COMMENTARY

- 6** Disability Action is disappointed that the letter-head does not contain a textphone number to enable deaf people to have the same access to the Committee as hearing people. (cover letter)
- 7** Disability Action would also question whether the Committee's website meets the current accessibility standards (for disabled people) and would ask the Committee for further information on this issue. (cover letter)
- 8** Disability Action is further disappointed that there is no offer to produce this document in alternative formats thereby disadvantaging many people with disabilities.

Is the mandate set out in the Political Parties, elections and Referendums Act 2000 conducive to the efficient and effective operation of the Electoral Commission as the regulator of elections and party political donations in the UK?

- 9 In light of the current investigations into the allocation of honours, Disability Action believes that the mandate of the Electoral Commission should be reviewed and revised to ensure the issue of “loans” which later become donations is effectively regulated.

In the light of the experience of the last five years are there any appropriate revisions to the mandate of the Commission that should be made to the Political Parties, elections and Referendums Act 2000?

- 10 See our response at paragraph 9 above.

In particular, is there an appropriate balance between the executive and advisory functions of the Electoral Commission?

- 11 Disability Action believes the balance between the executive and advisory functions of the Electoral Commission is appropriate.

Has the appropriate balance been struck in the division of responsibilities between the Electoral Commission and other public bodies in promoting public awareness of and participation in elections and referendums?

- 12 Disability Action believes that the promotion of public awareness and of electoral participation should be the lead responsibility of one body, in our view the Electoral Commission. This should not relieve other public bodies of their duties in this area, but would bring a strength and focus to this important issue which we believe could be improved.

Does the Electoral Commission operate as a strategic regulator in exercising its responsibilities in relation to:

- (a) the registration of political parties
- (b) the regulation of donations to parties; and
- (c) the control of campaign finance?

- 13 Yes

Does the independent legal status of the Electoral Commission provide it with sufficient independence from Government?

14 Yes

Is the financing of the Electoral Commission – through a combination of income received by the Commission for services, and money provided by Parliament from the Consolidated Fund – compatible with its independent regulatory role? Is there a more appropriate way of financing the Electoral Commission?

15 The Commission needs to ensure that payment for the provision of services does not jeopardise its independence. Funding from Parliament should also clearly not be dependant on an agreement of the Commission's programme of work or any other controlling issue.

Are the restrictions on who can be an Electoral Commissioner appropriate in the light of the responsibilities of Commissioners under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000?

16 Disability Action believes that all government departments, agencies and NDPB's must recognise the significant and long term under-representation of disabled people in their Boards and amongst their employees. All restrictions on who can be an Electoral Commissioner should be examined to ensure that they do not present barriers to the establishment of a diverse commission representative of the whole community it seeks to serve.

Does the Speaker's Committee of the House of Commons constitute an appropriate and effective accountability mechanism for the Electoral Commission?

17 Yes

If it does, are there any incremental changes to its composition, mandate or procedures which would contribute to its effectiveness?

18 No

Are the devolved administrations of the UK appropriately incorporated into the accountability mechanism?

19 Yes

Conclusion

20 Disability Action has welcomed the opportunity to contribute to this important debate.