

COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE
11TH INQUIRY: REVIEW OF THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION
LIKELY AREAS OF QUESTIONING BY THE COMMITTEE
PUBLIC HEARING IN BELFAST ON 21 JUNE 2006

Witness
Alliance Party

Mandate of the Electoral Commission

General

Overall reflections on how effective the Commission has been in fulfilling its mandate in Northern Ireland since its creation five years ago:

Alliance perceives the Electoral Commission has been effective in fulfilling its mandate, operating as a regulator in regards to the registration of political parties, donations to parties and controlling campaign finance.

Regulatory Role

The role and performance of the Commission in regulating campaign expenditure in Northern Ireland:

Alliance is concerned that the Electoral Commission has at times been weak in addressing complaints against the abuse/misuse of campaign expenditure.

While acknowledging that this may be in part due to available resources, we would propose that the Commission have greater ability/powers to enforce applicable legislation.

There is also the matter of having the police services take these matters more seriously. Here, we would encourage greater development of liaison and dialogue with the police. Again, greater ability/powers by the Commission could address this.

The future direction of party funding in Northern Ireland:

Alliance has made the following proposals, in response to this formal enquiry:

- Parties with two or more representatives in devolved administrations (e.g. Northern Ireland Assembly) should receive grant funding. Alliance endorses this recommendation by the Electoral Commission, and we seek enactment by Government.
- Alliance favours any scheme by which an individual's donation to a political party – up to an agreed limit – would be matched (in whole or part) by state funds and/or receive tax relief/exemption.
- Political Parties be required to submit a quarterly donation report to the Commission listing all donations accepted by the party's headquarters of more than £5,000 or multiple amounts below this amount which derive from any single donor and exceed in total £5,000 within this time period..
- All members of Parliament must declare personal and family interests which can conflict, or be perceived as conflicting, with Government business and/or interests.
- Commercial loans exceeding £5,000 - or multiples below this amount but totalling £5,000 or more by any one donor within a given time period – must be declared as a 'donation'.
- The Commission must vet for propriety, and assess the suitability of, all nominations for peerages.

Alliance is generally favourable toward the concept of increased state funding of political parties.

State funding exists at present, through indirect support for election Freepost deliveries and Party Election Broadcasts, and directly through Special Advisors, policy development grants, and party allowances for use in relations to legislatures. However, all of these are tightly designed for specific operational purposes.

Meanwhile, parties are having an increasingly difficult task in trying to sustain themselves at a central level. It is a growing challenge to survive on the basis of voluntary subscriptions alone. There is a global trend away from mass membership parties.

Parties are the main and essential conduit of the democratic process, and should have a solid foundation on which to conduct their vital work.

A move to increased state funding would be part of the general modernisation of British politics. It would help place the political process on a more stable, and a more transparent basis. It would

also help provide a more level playing field, and create better access to politics; it would undermine the ability of powerful corporations and unions to unduly influence politics.

Any move to increase state funding must be linked to greater requirements for reporting, limitations and other controls of expenditure.

Current State Support

Alliance has comments in regards to the current range of measures that amount to indirect or direct financial support for political parties.

Election Communications

Alliance supports the Freepost election address available to candidates. This is an invaluable tool that ensures minimum access to the electorate for all candidates, and gives voters information regarding all candidates.

Alliance believes that this offer is a vital mechanism for candidates to inform the electorate and should be retained.

Policy Development Grants

Alliance is most unhappy with the current scheme for the distribution of Policy Development Grants. These are currently awarded to those parties that have at least two MPs in Westminster, taking the oath of office. While eligibility is defined in terms of Westminster representation, the grants can be used in connection with policy work in Westminster, the European Parliament, regional Assemblies, or District Councils. This has the potential to, and does, in practice, create serious distortions.

The balance of parties in Westminster is not necessarily carried forward into other institutions. Voters may have different preferences for parties in devolved of local government than they do for Westminster. Different electoral systems can substantially alter the level of representation that parties receive in different bodies.

There are a number of parties across the UK, who have a stronger focus on institutions, such as regional Assemblies, than on the Westminster Parliament

The distortions arising from the current application of Policy Development Grants are most acute in relation to Northern Ireland. At present, three local parties have access to these grants through their representation in Westminster: the UUP, DUP and SDLP.

However, the main focus for all Northern Ireland parties is now the NI Assembly. These parties are able to use these funds in relation to institutions other than Westminster; in practice, there are no obstacles to deploying such grants in support of Assembly activities. This creates a severe disadvantage to those parties represented in the Assembly but not in Westminster.

Furthermore, given the scheme for distributing the grants throughout the UK, the NI based parties do extremely well compared to the larger GB-based parties. These grants therefore constitute a much higher relative proportion of the income of certain Northern Ireland based political parties.

These problems also affect the Greens, Scottish Socialists, and UKIP who all have significant representation in bodies other than the UK Parliament.

It is crucial that these problems with Policy Development Grants are resolved with some urgency.

There is also a major issue of transparency in discovering exactly what these funds are actually spent on.

Party Allowances

If formal state funding was to be recommended, Alliance would prefer that it is linked more to donations than to votes.

The latter approach would greatly risk ossifying the status quo, and not being sufficiently flexible to adjust to changes in public support, and to the emergence of new political movements.

The better way forward would be to give matching donations to party donations, up to a certain limit, or give donors tax credits to increase their donations.

Electoral Administration

The Commission's role in the electoral administration process and the role of others:

Alliance values the Commission's role in the electoral administration process. While the actual running of elections is by the Electoral Office, it is important to have the Commission available as an independent body, to deal with relevant concerns.

The electoral administration system in Northern Ireland – effectiveness and lessons for Great Britain:

Alliance believes that Northern Ireland provides a role model for the way that elections in the United Kingdom should be administered: a single Electoral Office with area offices, with a single Electoral Commission. Particular benefits are discussed in our response to Electoral Registration below.

The role of a Chief Electoral Officer:

The Chief Electoral Office is responsible for, amongst other duties, the proper maintenance of the electoral register and the secure and efficient running of elections. Alliance does not propose any fundamental change for the role of a Chief Electoral Officer, or the relationship between the Electoral Commission and the Electoral Office.

Electoral Registration

The accuracy, security and comprehensiveness of the electoral register in Northern Ireland

There was a long legacy of the perception of gross fraud in the Northern Ireland electoral register. Thankfully, this has been addressed through a series of reforms in the past 10 years.

The manner in which this was addressed in Northern Ireland provides a best practice example for the rest of the United Kingdom. Individual voter registration and identification verification are crucial for the integrity of the electoral register. The application of National Insurance Numbers, for example, has enabled an efficient means of deleting duplicate and impersonated electors.

Meanwhile, the Electoral Commission provides the forum for party representatives (and other stakeholders) to express their concerns about encouraging and ensuring voter registration.

Alliance would particularly draw to the Enquiry's attention the lessons and benefits that Northern Ireland has had in regards to the accuracy, security and comprehensiveness of the electoral register, and commends it to the rest of the UK.

Voter Education Issues

Effectiveness of the Commission in publicising the major changes to Northern Ireland's registration and voting systems:

The Electoral Commission has satisfactorily publicised issues related to voter registration and voting systems.

Regarding voter registration, many people should be able to recall regular billboard and leaflet campaigns.

Regarding voting systems, the Commission has made best efforts on highlighting the fact of two different voting systems being used on the same day (e.g. simultaneous elections to Westminster Parliament and local District Councils, 2001 and 2005).

However, the Electoral Office and/or Electoral Commission should set out more proactively to explain the voting systems themselves. For example, when the Single Transferrable Vote was (re-)introduced to Northern Ireland in 1973, there was a major information and education campaign. While this generation would now be well familiar with this system, there needs to be regular campaigns for new and lapsed/returning voters.

Role of the Commission in increasing voter participation in Northern Ireland:

The Electoral Commission has a significant role in efforts to increase voter participation, and should be provided greater ability/resources to do so.

It is important, though, in regards to under-participation, to appreciate those factors that are specific to Northern Ireland electors, versus those that can be observed more widely among the United Kingdom and indeed many other developed democracies. Nevertheless, Alliance believes that it is vital for any representative democracy to have an active, participating electorate.

In turn, however, is the need for the Electoral Commission to be seen as effective in regards to its powers of enforcement. There is little point in trying to encourage greater participation if there is a lack of trust in the integrity of the electoral process.

Governance

Do the current governance structure taken the interests of Northern Ireland properly into account

Yes.

Do the governance arrangements take sufficient account of the role of political parties including the Northern Ireland Political Parties Panel within the mandate of the Electoral Commission?

Yes.

Accountability

Who the Commission reports to and about what

Alliance is satisfied with the current communications structures of the Electoral Commission.

Appropriateness of the accountability framework to Northern Ireland

Alliance is satisfied with the current accountability framework, especially the role of the Speaker's Committee in the House of Commons.

Allan Leonard
General Secretary
21 June 2006