

SUBMISSION TO COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE
By Kelvin Hopkins MP

INQUIRY INTO ELECTORAL COMMISSION

By way of introduction, I have been politically active for almost fifty years and can claim to have canvassed (knocked on doors of potential voters) for the Labour Party in every single year since 1958. I have therefore experienced both electoral success and defeat - two sides of the democratic coin – and have given much careful thought both to party political processes and elections during that time.

The main point I wish to make to the Inquiry is that the political process should be separate from the regulation of the democratic process. The political process should be the responsibility of the political parties, and it is in my view the political parties who have been responsible for falling turnouts. Academic research by the CREST group shows that the only factor which correlates strongly with falling turnouts at general elections has been the diminishing political difference between the parties. This has now reached a point when it is arguable that on most of the major political issues, there are almost no significant differences between the leaderships of the three major parties.

This is of particular concern to people like myself in the Labour Party who remain committed to the principles of democratic socialism to which our Labour Party Constitution still refers. It is increasingly difficult however to persuade people on the doorstep that the recent Labour governments embrace that philosophy. Electors want a real political choice at elections and are not being given one.

Whilst I am very supportive of the Electoral Commission and the work it does, I do believe its mandate is too wide, particularly in respect of political engagement. Changing the electoral rules and the way elections are run cannot and will not enthruse voters nor persuade them to vote. There may be some short term novelty effect, for example, of all postal ballots, weekend elections or whatever but these will be no real counter to popular disillusionment with elections. The Electoral Commission may make heroic efforts to raise turnout but these are doomed to failure until the parties once again present real political choices at election time. The Electoral Commission has therefore been handed a virtually impossible task - that of increasing voter turnout.

In 1987 only 5% of electors thought there was little difference between the two main parties, and there was a 75.3% turnout in the General Election in that year. By 2001, 43% of electors thought there was not much difference between the two main parties and turnout had fallen to 59%. This was despite vast spending by the parties on election campaigning and lots of high profile razzamatazz.

Widening access to postal voting has been one measure designed to raise voter turnout. This has had some short term effect, and indeed without increased postal voting in recent elections, turnout could have been even lower. But postal voting is not the solution.

Postal voting has actually thrown up serious problems of corruption, notably the documented case of the Birmingham local elections in 2004. I strongly believe that postal voting should return to its previous basis being available only to those who are unable to vote in person or are of pensionable age. It should be for the political parties to attract voters to polling stations on the strengths of their policies, manifestos and campaigns, not a job for the Electoral Commission or Returning Officers. When voters have a distinctive political party they wish to vote passionately for, or indeed another political party they wish passionately to oppose, then I believe they will flock back to the ballot box.

There is much evidence, and I believe the pollsters will confirm this, that there has been no diminution of interest in politics in Britain, and possibly the reverse. What has happened is that people have lost their enthusiasm for elections because they do not like the parties.

Inquiry into Party Funding

On a different issue, it is of concern that the government has decided to set up a separate inquiry into the question of loans to political parties. It should obviously be the role of the Electoral Commission to undertake such an inquiry. Indeed, the Commission and the Committee have reported on party funding in the past.

There are those in government and elsewhere who would apparently wish to see an increase in state funding of political parties. I do not share these views and believe that the funding of parties should rightly be the responsibility of the respective parties' members. The Electoral Commission I believe should emphasise much more strongly the need to reduce limits on election spending and to reduce these limits drastically. If spending limits are low then the need to raise vast sums of money evaporates.

It is not healthy either for political parties to be funded largely by the state and nor should they be dependent on a few rich supporters. If parties are to be distinctive and genuinely independent, representing different philosophies and programmes, they should not be financially beholden either to the state or to the wealthy. Free delivery of election addresses, free party political broadcasts and some limited "Short" money should be the limit of state funding.

Membership of the Commission

The Commission's membership should include people with experience of national mainstream politics, similar to the membership of the former Boundary Commissions, although such members should form only a minority of the membership. The Electoral Commission's remit should also be closely focussed on matters of regulation and electoral organisation and not matters relating to political engagement. Electoral arrangements do of course have a powerful bearing on the outcome of elections, and where the Commission makes recommendations for change it should draw attention to these implications so that when Parliament comes to make its decisions they are fully aware of them. It should also help to ensure that the Electoral Commission is genuinely independent and seen to be independent in all its work.

I have a high regard for the Electoral Commission and it has indeed behaved scrupulously in its recent work. I wish to see the Commission retain its high esteem for the future, with a clear separation between the world of politics and electoral administration.

I hope my comments are helpful and look forward to a possible oral presentation to your inquiry.

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