

COMMITTEE ON STANDARDS IN PUBLIC LIFE

Review of The Electoral Commission Belfast Public Hearing – 21 June 2006 – written submission by Mrs June Butler, Assistant Chief Electoral Officer

The role of CEO in relation to electoral services in the province necessarily impacts on the relationship between CEO/EONI and the Electoral Commission. In Northern Ireland the Head of Office of the Commission does not have the same role in relation to co-ordinating advice or liaison with local authorities on electoral matters as his counterparts have in Scotland and Wales, and to a lesser extent staff in the central office in London have with English local authorities. The CEO has a central authoritative role and responsibility for all electoral services which is often referred to by the Electoral Commission as the model which they would aspire to for all of the United Kingdom.

Mandate of Electoral Commission

General

Only three areas of mandate of the Electoral Commission are of direct relevance to EONI –

1. Reporting on Conduct of Elections and referendums.

EONI finds the reports on the conduct of elections useful to a significant degree, especially in focussing on areas for future development, but in the past have lodged with the Commission some reservations:

- (a) they are produced quite a long period of time after the election;
- (b) they tend to generalise on one or two specific points which have been raised by only a very small percentage of polling staff or voters or politicians;
- (c) on occasions they are factually inaccurate;
- (d) EONI has limited time to comment on drafts – if greater time was given errors could be corrected;
- (e) they often make recommendations which have previously been implemented by EONI.

EONI does feed many of its election material/statistics into the reports and find this a useful forum to contribute to the various electoral debates. However shorter, timelier reports would be more helpful to EONI. It is also felt that they are not value for money – too elaborate, too late.

2. Giving advice and assistance on the conduct of elections and referendums.

This was the source of a great deal of contention when the EC office opened in Northern Ireland. EONI had great expertise in conducting

elections and EC had the remit to provide advice where none of its staff had any experience in electoral matters. After considerable negotiation EONI provided all the guidance/material for the training materials for the 2003 Assembly elections and these were produced by EC with joint branding.

At subsequent elections this pattern pertained, with EONI providing all the material direct to Commission's development/training officer in London who accepted the EONI material without question, acknowledging the EONI expertise and produced it jointly branded as an adjunct to the main contract for producing training, polling and count guidance manuals.

3. Education about electoral and democratic systems.

EONI is pleased to be invited to work closely with the Commission in advising on strategy for the education of electors – particularly in relation to:

- electoral registration – the annual canvass and cut-off dates prior to election;
- absent voting cut-off dates;
- the electoral ID card;
- different types of voting at combined elections.

Representatives of EONI and the NIO meet with the Head of the Commission's Belfast office to this end on a monthly basis.

Two other areas of the remit of the Electoral Commission have limited impact on EONI:

- Registration of Political Parties (how efficiently Registration on the NI Register is completed, especially immediately prior to elections).
- Consultation and involvement on changes to electoral law and procedures (for legislation specific to NI).

Other general points relating to the mandate of the Commission:

1. EONI would wish to see total responsibility for recording, reporting and providing advice on election expenses for all elections transferred to the Commission at an early date.
2. The period for the registration of political parties in advance of an election should be shortened (i.e. made earlier)
3. EONI is concerned about the introduction of the CORE scheme with the EC as "core keeper". The Register in NI is very different from the rest of the UK and, in effect, NI operates its own "model" core scheme.

Election/ Electoral Administration

Provision of training materials (videos etc) and staff manuals – all produced centrally through London Training/Operations Unit (not Belfast since 2003).

There is now no role for the local EC office in administration of elections - except for small input into candidates guide and spreadsheet for return of election expenses.

The model for electoral services is very different in Northern Ireland (see introduction) and thus the EC does not have any role in the operation of electoral functions within EONI or in co-ordinating or rationalising those functions. EONI benchmarks standards across all its Area Offices and the Commission will have no direct role in relation to setting or monitoring performance standards in Northern Ireland under the new Electoral Administration legislation. However for awareness and to ensure unofficial parity, there is EONI representation on the National EC working group to develop those standards.

EC staff in Belfast frequently seek advice from EONI staff re operational issues e.g. absent voting processes, nomination processes.

Voter Education

Since 2001 EC has taken over role of publicity in NI after the relevant budget was removed from EONI. There is consultation with EONI on timeliness of publicity but EONI has little input to the content of publicity (other than a quick check before roll-out for factual accuracy).

The Commission's outreach activities have been of value in raising awareness – especially in relation to young people when there was a youth outreach worker in 2004/5 – but this initiative seems to have died.

Since early 2005 outreach has been outsourced by EC and EONI has little evidence of a positive contribution to registration process; the company who provided “registration stands” at shopping centres and colleges during the 2005 canvass returned only 2000 forms, many incomplete. EONI did not feel this was value for money but there was very little feedback from the EC about this activity.

Publicity on closing dates for absent voting applications did not seem to be effective. However at combined elections in 2005 there was a better response than in 2001 by the public to information on two methods of voting and the number of “spoiled” votes was reduced.

Electoral Registration

Publicity to promote individual registration in 2002 was good and comprehensive, but it was very expensive and by 2005 the same campaign had become dated.

There was also good coverage for each canvass – excellent awareness raising. Focus groups provided good feedback on public interest.

There has been on-going statistical analysis of each register by PWC, a very useful exercise by which EONI can assess trends and areas of under-registration. Also it is helpful to be able to gauge population trends based on 2001 census. EONI would wish to have this analysis continue to inform the new registration processes from 2007.

Governance

See CEO's opening statement.

EONI would not wish to comment on any other aspect of governance.

Accountability

Again EONI would not wish to comment on the reporting structure for the Commission through the Speaker's Committee to parliament – this has no direct impact on EONI.

With regard to N. Ireland Parliamentary Parties Panel, EONI is of the view that this is a useful forum in the interest of the province and one of very few vehicles of consultation which exist for the political parties. Senior EONI staff attend each meeting for items which are related to elections, electoral registration and legislation and views are exchanged frankly by the parties and taken on board by EONI. The Commission acts as a facilitator but minutes from these meetings and action points are often not circulated until immediately before the next quarterly meeting. Also the impetus seems to have been lost with those meetings over the past year and party representation is often diminished.

E J B
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