

Chairman:
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PRESS NOTICE

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COMMITTEE BEGINS ITS ELEVENTH INQUIRY INTO THE ELECTORAL COMMISSION – ISSUES AND QUESTIONS PAPER PUBLISHED

The Committee on Standards in Public Life is today publishing a consultation paper setting out the key issues and questions on which it intends to focus during its Eleventh Inquiry into the mandate, governance and accountability of the Electoral Commission.

The Inquiry will examine the current responsibilities of The Electoral Commission, set up five years ago following the Fifth Report of the Committee in 1998. The Commission is an independent body set up by Parliament to promote integrity, effectiveness and participation in the democratic process. The Inquiry takes place against a background of public concerns about arrangements for postal voting following some high-profile legal cases, safeguards for voter registration, and allegedly circumventory loans to political parties. The inquiry will ask if the division of responsibilities is right between the Electoral Commission and other public bodies in promoting public awareness in elections and the democratic system. It will also examine whether the Electoral Commission is sufficiently independent from Government and how well its accountability to Parliament works.

Sir Alistair Graham, chairman of the Committee on Standards in Public Life commented:

“Confidence in our democratic process is vital to enable people to re-connect with politics. The Commission occupies a unique position in British public life, and in the institutional architecture designed to secure high standards and build trust in the democratic system.

“It is important to ask now, some five years after its creation, and following the second general election since its establishment, whether the Commission’s mandate, governance arrangements and accountability framework are fit for purpose.”

The beginning of the Eleventh Inquiry is marked by a three-month consultation period during which people are invited to give their views to the Committee on the subjects raised by the Issues and Questions Paper. A series of public hearings throughout the UK will be held later this year. Details of the Inquiry and how to submit evidence are published on the Committee’s website, www.public-standards.gov.uk.

The Electoral Commission's role encompasses both executive and advisory functions. The Commission is responsible for overseeing a number of aspects of electoral law – the registration of political parties, monitoring and publication of significant donations to registered political parties and the regulation of national party spending on election campaigns. In addition, the Commission has the role of managing referendums in the UK and promoting voter awareness and advising those involved in elections on practice and procedure, as well as reporting on the administration of every major election. Promoting public involvement accounts for a significant amount of the Commission's expenditure.

The Committee's terms of reference specifically preclude it from investigating individual cases or specific allegations of misconduct. Nor has the Committee any powers to require others to do so. But the Committee may take account of information on material cases in formulating its recommendations.

NOTES FOR EDITORS

1. The closing date for responses to the consultation paper is 16 May 2006. To obtain a copy people can call 0207-276-2589 or e-mail standards.evidence@gtnet.gov.uk. It is accessible on the Committee's website, www.public-standards.gov.uk.
2. The Electoral Commission was established as an independent statutory authority on 30 November 2000. This followed the recommendations of the Committee on Standards in Public Life's Fifth Report, The Funding of Political Parties in the United Kingdom and the subsequent commencement of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000.
3. The Committee's standing terms of reference are: "To examine current concerns about standards of conduct of all holders of public office, including arrangements relating to financial and commercial activities, and make recommendations as to any changes in present arrangements which might be required to ensure the highest standards of propriety in public life".
4. On 12 November 1997 additional terms of reference for the study on the funding of political parties were announced by the Prime Minister as: "To review issues in relation to the funding of political parties, and to make recommendations as to arrangements". The Committee's 11th Inquiry is located within these two combined terms of reference.
5. The committee has no power to investigate specific allegations of misconduct.
6. The full membership of the Committee is: Sir Alistair Graham (Chairman), Lloyd Clarke QPM, Rita Donaghy CBE, Professor Hazel Genn CBE, Dame Patricia Hodgson DBE, Baroness Maddock, The Rt Hon Baroness Shephard DL, Dr Elizabeth Vallance, Dr Brian Woods-Scawen DL.

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