

Clive Betts MP
Chair of the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Select Committee

26/8/22

by email to luhccom@parliament.uk

Dear Clive

I am writing on behalf of Unlock Democracy's 35,000 members and supporters regarding the publication on Monday of the government's draft strategy and policy statement for the Electoral Commission (EC).

I welcome your committee's inquiry into this subject.

It is regrettable that the draft statement was published whilst MPs are in recess. This restricts the amount of immediate scrutiny it can receive. It is also regrettable that the publication was accompanied by an unsubstantiated claim by the Secretary of State, Rt Hon Greg Clark, that the Electoral Commission is 'woke' because it has failed to tackle 'family voting'. I have written to the Secretary of State requesting he provide evidence of alleged 'wokery'. I hope the Select Committee will do the same.

A further worry is whether the lack of progress on the government's electoral integrity project (it was given a red rating by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority) will make it hard or impossible for the EC to deliver some of the requirements being placed on it by the government. I hope the Select Committee will consider the implications of this red rating on the EC's ability to deliver its core functions.

Unlock Democracy, our supporters, and many other organisations in the democracy sector perceive big money in politics (and disinformation) to be the greatest threat to our democracy and electoral integrity. But the statement makes almost no reference to this issue, even though Lord Pickles recommendation 43 is explicit in stating that: *The Electoral Commission should also more narrowly focus on its core functions – of party finance and overseeing national campaign expenditure.*

From the outset, our major concern about the government's statement was that it would directly interfere with the independence of the Electoral Commission. The Government is now directing the Commission's work and identifying its priority functions. It states, 'It is the government's view that these priority functions should be the focus of the Electoral Commission's work and allocation of resources'.

This is completely incompatible with a subsequent government claim that 'This Statement does not seek to interfere with the governance of the Commission and the Commission remains operationally independent.' By stating what the EC's focus should be and how it should allocate its resources, the government is impacting on the EC's operational independence. It could also be opening the way to legal challenges if the EC in its actions does not reflect the government's priorities.

One notable omission from the government's statement is a specific request that the EC focus on the impact of the introduction of photographic voter ID on turnout. This is astonishing given concerns expressed that the NI experience of photo voter ID, if replicated, could lead to turnout in elections in Great Britain falling by upto a million and the fact that the government has identified access to polls as a core priority function. I hope the Select Committee will draw attention to this omission.

I remain convinced that any statement by the government in relation to the EC damages its independence.

I would urge the Select Committee after reviewing the statement to call for:

- **The withdrawal of the statement because it threatens the independence of the Electoral Commission**
- **The Speaker to guarantee that the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission will never in future have a government majority**
- **Legislation to be brought forward to tackle big money in politics**

I look forward to your response.

Yours sincerely



Tom Brake - Director of Unlock Democracy