

## Written evidence from the electoral Commission (TEC 03)

### Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee The work of the Electoral Commission inquiry

**It is now twenty years since the Electoral Commission was set up by the UK Parliament, as the independent body to oversee elections and regulate political finance in the UK. We play a vital role in maintaining the robustness and legitimacy of our UK democracy, both as a whole and in the nations of the UK.**

In the UK elections are well-run. Parties and established campaigners work closely with the Commission, contributing to a strong culture of compliance. The processes of registering voters, and casting votes, are carried out rigorously and transparently, and attract high levels of public satisfaction. The Commission's work is integral to this:

- **We support electoral administrators, candidates, parties and campaigners by providing guidance, resources and tailored advice.** For local authorities, this enables them to deliver their work effectively, and ensures a high quality consistent service for voters and campaigners. For those who are campaigning, this enables them to understand and comply with the rules, and focus their efforts on engaging voters.
- **We support the public by providing information on registration and voting.** In the short lead up to the 2019 general election we handled nearly 9,000 enquiries. Our website was visited by 1.3 million users and during our voter registration campaign 2.6 million people applied to register.
- **We maintain the registers of political parties and campaigners.** We support voter confidence in the polling booth by checking that each group can comply with its legal obligations, and only permitting names, descriptions and emblems that do not offend, mislead or confuse the voter.
- **We regulate Parliament's rules on political finance.** We deliver transparency so that voters can see how parties and campaigners are funded and how they spend their money. When breaches of these rules occur, our investigations into parties and campaigners are robust and carried out to the highest standards. We also administer policy development grant to parties.
- **We work closely with the police, prosecuting authorities and electoral administrators on their work to tackle electoral fraud,** and help candidates run respectful campaigns and protect themselves from abuse. We publish fraud data annually to provide transparency to voters.
- **We identify and advocate for changes to improve our electoral system.** We have made the case for a number of positive changes, including individual and anonymous voter registration and greater transparency of donations to political parties in Northern Ireland. We continue to develop and make the case for changes to keep pace with technology and society.
- **We facilitate transparency of information about our democracy,** include reporting on UK elections; collating and publishing candidate spending returns data; and assessing the completeness and accuracy of the UK's electoral registers.
- **We work across sectors to champion a strong UK democratic process,** collaborating with other regulators, liaising with the security and cyber-security services, engaging the main social media platforms, and representing the UK internationally through work with overseas electoral bodies.

## Key priorities

In March this year the Speaker's Committee approved the Commission's five year Interim Corporate Plan. Our statutory responsibilities give us a unique position in the sector to coordinate, to guide, and to provide leadership. We are focussing on providing support to: increase voter confidence; strengthen the resilience of electoral administrators; assist party and campaigner compliance; and ultimately enable delivery of the agendas of the UK's governments. The UK Government has an ambitious electoral reform agenda, as do governments in Scotland and Wales.

- We are working with the electoral sector to address and support the delivery of well-run polls in May 2021. The Covid-19 pandemic has significant implications for elections and electoral processes, in what is already a busy and complex electoral timetable.
- We are enhancing our support to electoral administrators. While our guidance is already well-received and widely relied upon, we will strengthen our focus to help address the challenges local authorities are facing in delivering effective electoral services, including through increased work to identify and share good practice.
- To support voter confidence, we are developing a public awareness campaign on digital campaigning and a voter education programme for schools and colleges that promotes understanding of the democratic process.
- We are putting renewed effort into supporting political parties, candidates and campaigners to comply with the rules before breaches happen. Most work hard to comply with the political finance rules, and we want enforcement action to be the exception, not the rule.
- In conjunction with parties and campaigners, we are developing an online tool that will make it easier for them to upload spending returns and donation reports. Together these steps will make compliance easier, reduce the number of electoral offences committed and improve transparency for the voter.
- We are working with each of the UK's governments on their programme of electoral reform. We will continue to provide expert advice and resources in response to changes such as reforms to the annual canvass process, the UK Government's plan to introduce voter ID, and the extended franchises in Scotland and Wales. Our support will help ensure the reforms are properly understood by those they affect, and are implemented effectively.

### **Developing a prosecutions capability**

Later this year we will consult on changes to our Enforcement Policy. We will be looking for views on how we could bring prosecutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and bring our regulatory work in line with a wide range of other regulators. It will also free up the resources of the police and prosecutors, although they will remain the lead on more serious criminal investigations and prosecutions.

A prosecutions capability will enable us to investigate and bring lower order electoral law offences before the courts in a way which is swift, proportionate, and compliant with the investigation standards. This will deter those tempted to break electoral law, deliver more effective regulation of political finance and support public confidence.