



Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights

UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND

GENERAL ELECTION 2010

OSCE/ODIHR NEEDS ASSESSMENT MISSION REPORT

19-22 January 2010



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**UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND
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OSCE/ODIHR Needs Assessment Mission Report

I. INTRODUCTION

In anticipation of an invitation from the authorities of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to observe the 2010 general election and in line with its standard methodology, the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) undertook a Needs Assessment Mission (NAM) from 19 to 22 January 2010.

The purpose of the OSCE/ODIHR NAM was to assess the pre-electoral environment and the preparations for the elections, and to make recommendations regarding a possible OSCE/ODIHR activity for this election. The OSCE/ODIHR NAM included Mr. Konrad Olszewski, Deputy Head of Election Department, and Ms. Tatyana Bogussevich, OSCE/ODIHR Election Adviser.

The OSCE/ODIHR is grateful to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office for its assistance and co-operation in organizing the NAM. The OSCE/ODIHR would also like to thank the Electoral Commission, Ministry of Justice, electoral officials, as well as the representatives of political parties, civil society and mass media for having taken the time to meet with the NAM. The list of meetings is attached to this report.

II. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The parliament of the United Kingdom is bicameral, composed of the House of Lords (upper chamber) and the House of Commons (lower chamber). The members of the House of Commons are elected under the first-past-the-post system in single-seat constituencies. The next House of Commons will comprise 650 members instead of 646 following the creation of additional constituencies that reflect changes in the size of the electorate.

Legislation stipulates that members of the House of Commons can serve for the maximum of five years. The prime minister may dissolve the parliament and call a general election at any time. The term of the current parliament expires on 10 May 2010. According to the OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors, the next general election is expected to take place on 6 May 2010.

The legal framework for elections is very complex. The electoral process is regulated by a large number of legal acts and regulations, which could benefit from consolidation and simplification. Although the Electoral Commission (EC) has addressed the current government with a consolidation request, the process has yet to start. In response to an OSCE/ODIHR recommendation and in line with OSCE commitments, a legal basis for election observation was created. Election observers should however have access to the entire election process. The authorities are yet to address the 2005 ruling of the European Court of Human Rights on the disenfranchisement of prisoners.

Elections are administered by Returning Officers (ROs), who are appointed by local government authorities and who oversee the conduct of elections at the constituency level. ROs appoint Presiding Officers who manage the process at polling stations. The Electoral Commission, established in 2000 as an independent body with no direct role in the administration of elections, is responsible for researching, reporting and developing guidance on different aspects of an electoral process. It is also responsible for the registration of political parties.

Candidates can stand in elections as independents or on behalf of registered political parties. Candidate nominations need to be supported by ten voters in a constituency and require an electoral deposit of 500 British pounds. Deposits are returned to candidates that gained more than five per cent of valid votes cast in a constituency.

Voters may cast ballots in person, as well as vote by proxy or by post. Following allegations and confirmed cases of fraud related to postal voting in previous elections, the legislation was amended to require the submission of personal identifiers (signature and date of birth) when applying and voting by mail. While interlocutors of the OSCE/ODIHR NAM welcomed tightening of postal vote regulations and the introduction of additional safeguards, many considered that the system continues to lack robustness, primarily due to the weakness of voter registration.

Apart from names and addresses of voters, voter lists currently do not contain any personal identifiers which could help distinguish voters. In addition, voters are not obliged to present any identification to be able to vote. The current system of voter registration has long been a subject of concern and debate, and in 2009, provisions were introduced for a gradual shift to individual electoral registration to be implemented by 2015.

The electoral campaign is underway. Political parties met by the OSCE/ODIHR NAM were confident that they would be able to compete on a level playing field. The United Kingdom has a diverse media landscape, with a strong tradition of public service broadcasting and a large national newspaper sector. While paid political advertising on television is prohibited, public service broadcasters are required to allocate free airtime for party campaign spots. For the first time, debates between the leaders of three main parliamentary parties will be organized. Regional parties expressed concern about their exclusion from national debates.

While the authorities have considered and followed up on a number of previous OSCE/ODIHR recommendations in line with OSCE commitments, including the introduction of provisions for election observation, a number of recommendations remain unaddressed. These pertain, in particular, to shortcomings with regard to voter registration and postal voting.

The authorities have considered and followed up on a number of previous OSCE/ODIHR recommendations in line with OSCE commitments, including the introduction of provisions for election observation. While they initiated reforms to address shortcomings that pertain in particular to voter registration and postal voting, substantial changes in these areas are still pending. As OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors have welcomed an OSCE/ODIHR activity in connection with this election and in light of the remaining issues identified in this and in previous reports, the OSCE/ODIHR NAM recommends that an Election Assessment Mission be deployed.

III. FINDINGS

A. BACKGROUND AND POLITICAL CONTEXT

The United Kingdom is a constitutional monarchy comprised of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II is the head of state with largely ceremonial powers.¹ Executive powers are mostly exercised by the government appointed by the prime minister from among the members of parliament. The prime minister is traditionally the leader of the party that gained the largest number of seats in the House of Commons in the last general election.

The bicameral parliament, comprised of the House of Lords and the House of Commons, is the highest legislative authority responsible for overseeing the work of the government as well as reviewing, debating and approving legislative bills. Members of the House of Lords, the upper chamber, are mostly appointed for life.² Following the creation of additional constituencies, the number of members elected to the House of Commons, the lower chamber, will increase in the 2010 general election from 646 to 650. Bills passed by the House of Commons, with the exception of those related to the budget, require approval by the House of Lords.

The House of Commons does not have a fixed term. The legislation only requires that it be dissolved after a maximum of five years. The prime minister has a prerogative power to ask the Queen to dissolve the parliament and to call a general election before the end of the five-year period at any time. Once the elections are called, the formal electoral period lasts only 17 working days. The term of the current parliament is to expire on 10 May 2010.³ The OSCE/ODIHR NAM was informed that the most likely date of the general election is Thursday, 6 May 2010. In such an eventuality, the general election will coincide with municipal elections.

Following the 2005 general election, 10 political parties and two independent candidates obtained seats in the House of Commons. The center-left Labour Party, gained the majority of seats, 356. Its current leader, Gordon Brown, has served as prime minister since June 2007. The second largest party, the center-right Conservative Party, obtained 198 seats. The party's leader, David Cameron, leads the parliamentary opposition and heads the 'shadow cabinet'. The third largest party, the traditionally centrist Liberal Democratic Party, gained 63 seats. Other parliamentary parties holding considerably smaller numbers of seats include the Democratic Unionist Party, Scottish National Party (SNP), Sinn Fein,⁴ Plaid Cymru, Social Democratic and Labour Party (SDLP), Ulster Unionist Party and Respect.

¹ The Queen has authority to formally open and dissolve the Parliament, approve the nomination of the Prime Minister and the government, as well as to approve legislative bills for them to become law.

² The House of Lords currently has some 740 members. The majority of members are appointed for life by the Queen. Other members are hereditary peers, who were elected internally to retain membership on an exceptional basis following the prohibition introduced in 1999 for hereditary peers to sit and vote in the House of Lords. In addition, a limited number of Church of England archbishops and bishops sit in the House.

³ The five-year period is calculated from the day of the first meeting of the parliament following the general election. The current parliament convened for the first time on 11 May 2005.

⁴ Members elected from Sinn Fein party eventually did not take up their seats.

The OSCE/ODIHR assessed the 2003 elections for the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and the 2005 general election.⁵ It concluded that the 2005 general election overall enjoyed the confidence of candidates and voters. It was administered in a professional manner and allowed for a fair and pluralistic campaign. The report offered the authorities a number of recommendations for improvements.

B. LEGAL FRAMEWORK

The legal framework for elections is very complex and includes numerous Acts, Statutory Instruments, Regulations, Orders and Rules. The primary election legislation includes the Representation of Peoples Act (RPA; 1983), Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (PPERA; 2000), as well as two more recent legislative acts – the Electoral Administration Act (EAA; 2006) and the Political Parties and Elections Act (PPEA; 2009).

OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors concurred that the legal framework is structurally overly complex and would benefit from consolidation and simplification, as previously recommended by the OSCE/ODIHR. The Electoral Commission indicated that it has addressed the current government with a consolidation request. According to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), the consolidation has not taken place yet and would require that there be a ‘quiet’ period in legislative terms to make such an overhaul possible and meaningful.

Many interlocutors of the OSCE/ODIHR NAM opined that the conduct of elections in the United Kingdom is based on trust and does not contain sufficient safeguards to prevent possible malpractices. They underscored that the recent acts, including EAA and PPEA, tightened some legal requirements; however, many spoke in favor of further regulation and the inclusion of additional control mechanisms. Of particular concern to the majority of interlocutors were current provisions for voter registration and postal voting (see sections E and F for details). It was also noted that cases of electoral fraud in previous elections and remaining legal loopholes could tarnish the confidence of the electorate in the system.

The disenfranchisement of prisoners, which the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) ruled in 2005 was disproportionate and incompatible with the right to participate in elections, is an issue under consideration by the government.⁶ The MoJ completed public consultations on the matter; however, changes are unlikely to be introduced before the general election. In an Interim Resolution of 3 December 2009, the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe expressed serious concern with regard to the substantial delay in implementing the ECHR judgment and urged that corresponding measures be rapidly introduced.⁷ According to OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors, some 63,000 potential voters are affected.

In response to previous recommendations by the OSCE/ODIHR and in line with OSCE commitments, the EAA created a legislative basis for election observation. Election observers were granted the right to follow such stages of the electoral process as issuance and receipt of postal ballots, voting and counting of votes. However, current provisions do not allow

⁵ Final Reports of the OSCE/ODIHR Election Assessment Missions to 2003 elections for the devolved administrations of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and 2005 general election are available at www.osce.org/odihr-elections/14673.html.

⁶ Case Hirst vs United Kingdom, no. 74025/01 (6 October 2005), available at www.echr.coe.int.

⁷ See press release 932(2009) on the Interim Resolution CM/ResDH(2009)160 at <https://wcd.coe.int/ViewDoc.jsp?id=1555725&Site=CM>.

observation of such crucial stages of an electoral process as voter registration, nomination and registration of candidates, the work of election officials, or tabulation and aggregation of results.⁸

The legislation stipulates that the conduct of elections can be challenged by post-election petitions, which need to be lodged within 21 days after election day. Petitions can be brought by individuals who have sufficient grounds to claim that there was an ‘undue election’ or ‘undue return,’ and that the contested actions affected the outcome of an election. Cases are heard by an ‘election court,’⁹ which has authority to invalidate results and to order a new election.

The OSCE/ODIHR NAM was informed that in addition to post-election petitions, decisions and actions of election officials as employees of civil service can theoretically also be challenged in the course of a campaign in the High Court under the judicial review procedure.¹⁰ The OSCE/ODIHR NAM was informed that legal challenges are generally rare. Stakeholders most commonly prefer to deal with complaints informally, rather than to seek formal legal redress, due to high costs involved.

C. ELECTORAL SYSTEM

The members of the House of Commons are elected under first-past-the-post system in single-seat constituencies. Candidates who receive the highest numbers of valid votes in their respective constituencies win. The right to vote and to stand in elections is granted to citizens of the United Kingdom, the Commonwealth¹¹ and the Republic of Ireland of 18 years of age, who are registered as residents in an electoral constituency.¹² Some restrictions to these rights apply to prisoners, bankrupts and persons found guilty of illegal or corrupt practices, among others. Citizens of the United Kingdom living abroad qualify to register as overseas voters and can vote by post or by proxy, provided they were registered to vote in the United Kingdom for 15 years before an application as an overseas voter.¹³

The Boundary Commissions for England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland delineate constituencies. The commissions are required to carry out reviews and to re-draw boundaries as necessary every 8 to 12 years to reflect the changes in the size of the electorate. The law

⁸ In implementation of its duty to establish and administer a scheme for the accreditation of election observers, the Electoral Commission developed and is currently in process of reviewing the Code of Practice for observers. In the framework of a public consultation process, the EC sought and received comments from the OSCE/ODIHR with regard to election observer provisions in United Kingdom in 2006 and 2009.

⁹ ‘Election courts’ are held if petitions are submitted after elections. Cases are heard by two judges, who are on rota for the trial of parliamentary election petitions and who have the same jurisdiction and authority as judges of the High Court.

¹⁰ Judicial review is a form of a court proceeding in which a judge reviews the decisions or actions made by a public body. It only examines whether a public body followed all legal procedures in an impugned activity and does not assess the correctness of the decision itself or its impact. In addition, such challenges are possible only if no alternative remedy is available to a claimant.

¹¹ Apart from age, nationality and residency requirements, Commonwealth citizens qualify to be registered as voters provided they do not require permission to remain in UK or have such permission granted to them under the conditions laid out in the 1971 Immigration Act.

¹² The candidacy age was lowered by the EAA in 2006 from 21 years.

¹³ Citizens of the Commonwealth and of the Republic of Ireland may only vote in general elections if resident in the United Kingdom.

requires that constituencies include approximately the same number of voters and respect the borders of local administrative units. The last review was carried out across the United Kingdom in 2007. It resulted in alterations of the majority of boundaries and led to the creation of four additional constituencies. Constituencies will now represent an average of approximately 65,000 voters. However, according to the EC, exceptional deviations from the average, which are justified by specific local conditions, remain in the new constituency plan.

Candidates can stand in elections as independents or on behalf of a registered political party. Prospective candidates must collect signatures of ten voters from their respective constituency, fill candidate consent and home address forms and provide an authorization to run on behalf of a party (for party candidates). They also have to make an electoral deposit of 500 British pounds.¹⁴ Their nomination documents are submitted to respective Returning Officers (ROs).

D. ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

The administration and organization of elections is mostly vested with local government authorities. The MoJ is the central government authority responsible for the legal framework for general elections. The EC, established in 2000 as an independent public body reporting to the parliament, does not have a direct role in administering elections. However, the EC plays an important role in researching, reporting and developing guidance on different aspects of an electoral process. It is also responsible for registration of political parties and for overseeing party and candidate finances. The PPEA foresees the appointment of four additional permanent commissioners by parliamentary parties.

The ROs are responsible for the administration of elections in their respective constituencies. They are appointed by local councils. In turn they appoint Presiding Officers (POs) who manage polling stations. They are supported by staff assisting with polling, issuance and receipt of postal ballots and counting. All involved in administering elections are bound by impartiality requirements in execution of their duties. Importantly, election officials have purely administrative functions and do not have responsibility for overseeing the campaign and the conduct of candidates.

In order to bring greater uniformity in conducting elections, the EC was granted the authority to set standards and assess the performance of election officials, as recommended by the OSCE/ODIHR. The EC developed these standards for various election officials and published detailed guidance for ROs on the preparation and conduct of the 2010 general election. In addition, election officials will be able to take part in training courses organized by non-governmental organizations.¹⁵

With the possibility to call elections at any time and the resulting short official pre-electoral period, election administrators stated to the OSCE/ODIHR NAM that it was challenging to make all necessary arrangements in a timely manner. This year, election administrators expect

¹⁴ Electoral deposits are returned to candidates that gained more than five per cent of valid votes cast in a constituency.

¹⁵ Such training course will be organized by the Association of Electoral Administrators, an independent professional body uniting some 1,600 election administrators across United Kingdom, and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers.

additional complications due to the changes in constituency boundaries and the expected late disbursement of funds.

E. VOTER REGISTRATION

Voter lists are drawn by Electoral Registration Officers (EROs) on the basis of data submitted annually by heads of households on behalf of residents of voting age. In addition, the legislation provides for ‘rolling’ registration, which allows voters to be entered in the lists at any point, up until eleven working days before an election. Apart from names and addresses of voters, registers currently do not contain any personal identifiers, which could help distinguish voters. While submission of false data might result in a fine or imprisonment, the OSCE/ODIHR NAM was informed that EROs are not required to verify the data and have limited capacity to do so.

In 2005, the OSCE/ODIHR EAM recommended to review the legal framework with a view to prioritizing individual voter registration. In its 2007 opinion, the Monitoring Committee of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) concluded that “the main underlying weakness of the electoral system in Great Britain is the current household registration system without personal identifiers. This system makes it extremely easy to add bogus characters to the voters lists.”¹⁶

In December 2009, the EC published an interim report on the accuracy and completeness of a sample of voter lists.¹⁷ The report states that the most common deficiencies identified were the inclusion of an unusually large number of persons in a household and the duplication of names.

Taking these shortcomings into consideration, the PPEA envisages a gradual shift from household registration to individual electoral registration (IER).¹⁸ It provides for an initial phase during which voters could submit personal data such as date of birth, signature and national insurance numbers on a voluntary basis when registering, starting from mid-2010. The IER will only be endorsed by the parliament after 2015 following a positive recommendation by the EC expected mid-2014. The decision to shift to IER was welcomed by all OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors, although some concerns were raised that the system will be put into place over a protracted period of time.

The OSCE/ODIHR NAM was informed that the government continues to develop a Co-ordinated Online Record of Electors (CORE), which is meant to become a central database of voter lists compiled by different local authorities that will allow for cross-checks. Also the CORE will be introduced over the course of some time.

¹⁶ Opinion by PACE Monitoring Committee AS/Mon (2007) 38, Application to initiate a monitoring procedure to investigate electoral fraud in the United Kingdom, para 85; available at www.assembly.coe.int/CommitteeDocs/2008/electoral_fraud_UK_E.pdf.

¹⁷ Interim report on case study research into the electoral registers in Great Britain, December 2009; available at www.electoralcommission.co.uk.

¹⁸ Northern Ireland has been using individual electoral registration with personal identifiers since 2002.

As previously, voters do not need to present any forms of identification to be able to vote.¹⁹ The OSCE/ODIHR NAM was informed that this is linked to the controversy on the introduction of ID cards currently not in use in the United Kingdom. Some interlocutors feared the requirement to present an ID with a photograph would result in disenfranchisement of a considerable proportion of voters. The MoJ argued there were too few proven cases of ‘personation’, i.e. voting in place of other voters, in the last elections to introduce such a measure.

F. POSTAL VOTING

Provisions for postal voting, introduced in the United Kingdom in 1918, were liberalized in 2000 as a measure to counter falling voter turnout. The requirement for voters to provide an explanation as to why a postal ballot is being requested and why they will not be able to vote in person was removed. As a result, the percentage of voters casting their ballots by mail has noticeably increased. In the 2005 general election, some 12 per cent of the electorate voted by mail. However, liberal postal vote procedures were prone to possible abuse and were at the center of allegations and confirmed cases of electoral malpractice.²⁰

Seeking to address the shortcomings, additional safeguards were introduced to the system of postal voting in 2006. Voters are now required to submit personal identifiers, namely signature and date of birth, both when applying for postal voting and when sending ballots by mail.²¹ Upon receipt of postal votes, election officials are obliged to check at least 20 per cent of personal identifiers against those included in applications. The OSCE/ODIHR NAM was informed that frequently all identifiers are verified.

OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors welcomed the tightening of regulations and the additional safeguards. It was, however, noted that the system remains vulnerable to fraud, primarily due to the underlying problem of weak voter registration system currently in place. The PACE Monitoring Committee has reported that “the combination of the household registration system without personal identifiers and the postal vote on demand arrangements make the election system in Great Britain very vulnerable to electoral fraud.”²² In its report on allegations of electoral malpractice during the 2008 local elections in Great Britain, the EC writes that “now the focus of cases and allegations [of fraud] is moving to earlier in the voting process, with an emphasis on fraudulent registration to vote and fraudulent applications to vote by post or proxy.”²³

¹⁹ Since 2002, voters in Northern Ireland are required to present an identification document with a photograph to be able to vote.

²⁰ See *inter alia op. cit.*, PACE Monitoring Committee opinion, as well as reports by the EC on allegations of electoral malpractice in England and Wales, 2007, and on allegations of electoral malpractice at June 2009 elections, 2010 for details of investigated cases. Two later reports are available at www.electoralcommission.org.uk.

²¹ Postal voting can be requested until 11 working days before an election and postal ballots must be received before the end of voting on election day.

²² *Op. cit.*, PACE Monitoring Committee opinion, para 84.

²³ Report on allegations of electoral malpractice at the May 2008 elections in England and Wales by the EC, April 2009, para 1.10; available at www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/74588/Allegations-of-Electoral-Malpractice-Web-Final.pdf.

G. CAMPAIGN AND CAMPAIGN FINANCING

Political parties and prospective candidates are allowed to start campaigning at any point ahead of election. The campaign for the 2010 general election is evidently underway and political parties met by the OSCE/ODIHR NAM were confident that they would be able to compete on a level playing field. Financially stronger political parties are planning to campaign nationally, with the Conservative Party anticipating that it will invest considerable resources in the campaign in media and visual advertising. Other parties are planning to run local campaigns focusing on their specific constituencies and electorate. Copies of voter lists which all registered parties and candidates are entitled to receive appear to be key in planning campaigns, identifying potential voters and making sure supporters cast ballots on election day.

The legislation grants registered candidates the right to free postage and free use of public venues for campaign events. Registered candidates are obliged to nominate agents to help them manage campaigns and finances, and are entitled to nominate representatives to attend postal vote opening proceedings, polling and counting. To enhance participation of women, some political parties have internal quotas or policies with regard to nomination of women as candidates.

The legislation as amended by PPEA in 2009 contains extensive regulations on financing of political parties, candidates, as well as third parties contributing to campaigns. All registered political parties are obliged to report to the EC quarterly on donations and loans received and annually on their complete accounts. Both annual accounts and campaign expenditure reports must be audited if total amounts exceed 250,000 British pounds.

Additional regulations apply to campaign periods. The ‘regulated’ campaign period in terms of finances has been set to begin on 1 January 2010. Campaign expenditures incurred before that date need not be reported. While the law stipulates indicative ceilings on campaign expenditures by candidates, actual limits are set only after the announcement of the election date and depend on the duration of the campaign. Spending limits for political parties depend on the number of contested parliamentary seats. During the campaign period, parties are obliged to report on donations and loans received on a weekly basis. After the election, parties and candidates are required to submit complete campaign reports. There is both criminal and civil liability for failure to comply with legal requirements related to financing. All financial reports submitted to the EC are publicly available on its website.

OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors commented overall positively on party and campaign finance regulations. However, some parties stated that the uncertainty surrounding the election date makes the planning of the campaign more difficult and complicates the management of finances by candidates.

H. MEDIA FRAMEWORK

The United Kingdom has a diverse media landscape, with a strong tradition of public service broadcasting and a large national newspaper sector. A wide range of laws regulates the work of media, with the Office of Communications (OFCOM) serving as the primary licensing and supervisory authority for broadcasting media.

All television and radio channels are obliged to comply with OFCOM's Broadcasting Code, which sets standards of accuracy, impartiality and fairness of coverage.²⁴ Section 6 of the Code deals specifically with the media coverage of elections. It states that "due weight must be given to the coverage of major parties during the election period. Broadcasters must also consider giving appropriate coverage to other parties and independent candidates with significant views and perspectives."²⁵ OFCOM has authority to adjudicate on media-related complaints and may impose sanctions in cases of serious and deliberate breaches. The BBC, UK's main public service broadcaster, is regulated by its own Charter and Agreement, which require it to provide comprehensive, balanced and impartial coverage of all main views and voices.²⁶

While paid political advertising on television is prohibited, all television and radio channels with public service obligations are required to allocate free airtime for party election broadcasts. OFCOM's rules on allocation of airtime stipulate that during a campaign 'major' parties²⁷ should be granted series of broadcasts of three to five minutes in length and parties standing in one sixth of constituencies should also be granted some airtime.²⁸

The novelty in the campaign, which is expected to generate great public interest, is the organization of debates between leaders of the three main political parties by major national broadcasters. Some channels with regional services plan to hold separate debates inclusive of representatives of prominent regional parties. However, representatives of SNP and Plaid Cymru expressed concern with regard to the exclusion of their parties from national debates and feared that these debates would fail to adequately reflect regional specifics.

There is great diversity among newspapers in the United Kingdom. Most of them support certain political alternatives and overall provide for pluralism in the information available to voters about politics and elections.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with OSCE commitments, the authorities have considered and followed up on a number of previous OSCE/ODIHR recommendations. For instance, the legislation now contains provisions for election observation, although rights of observers are restricted to certain stages of the process. However, a number of recommendations remained unaddressed. These pertain, in particular, to shortcomings identified previously by the OSCE/ODIHR with regard to voter registration and postal voting. In addition, the consolidation of the election legislation has yet to commence following the EC request to the MoJ.

The authorities have considered and followed up on a number of previous OSCE/ODIHR recommendations in line with OSCE commitments, including the introduction of provisions

²⁴ Some provisions of the Code do not apply to the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC).

²⁵ OFCOM Broadcasting Code, Section 6, para 6.2.

²⁶ BBC's draft election guidelines for the forthcoming elections stipulate that balance and impartiality in reporting need to be ensured either in a single programme or over the course of the campaign overall.

²⁷ Current OFCOM Rules on party political and referendum broadcasts list Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democratic Parties in Great Britain, SNP in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales as 'major' parties. 'Major' parties in Northern Ireland are defined as Democratic Unionist Party, SDLP, Sinn Fein and Ulster Unionist Party.

²⁸ BBC has a separate election broadcast allocation scheme, which is normally similar to that of OFCOM.

for election observation. While they initiated reforms to address shortcomings that pertain in particular to voter registration and postal voting, substantial changes in these areas are still pending. As OSCE/ODIHR NAM interlocutors have welcomed an OSCE/ODIHR activity in connection with this election and in light of the remaining issues identified in this and in previous reports, the OSCE/ODIHR NAM recommends that an Election Assessment Mission be deployed.

ANNEX: LIST OF MEETINGS

Foreign and Commonwealth Officer

Anwar Choudhury, Director, International Institutions
Benjamin Greenwood, OSCE Desk Officer

Ministry of Justice

Mark Sweeney and Paul Docker, Head of Electoral Strategy, Electoral Policy Department

The Electoral Commission

Andrew Scallan, Director of Electoral Administration and Boundaries
Tom Hawthorn, Head of Performance Standards

Association of Electoral Administrators

John Turner, Chief Executive

Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers (SOLACE)

David Monks, Chair, Electoral Matters Panel

Birmingham City Council/Electoral Office

Robert Connelly, Senior Solicitor, Civil Litigation Team

The University of Birmingham

Chris Game, Institute of Local Government Studies

Labour Party

Alicia Kennedy, Deputy General Secretary
Roy Kennedy, Director of Finance and Compliance

Conservative Party

Mike Dolley, Deputy Field Campaign Manager

Liberal Democratic Party

Ben Stoneham, Director of the Headquarters
Paul Speller, Head of the International Office

Plaid Cymru

Hywel Williams, Member of the Westminster Parliament

Scottish National Party

Angus Robertson, Member of the Westminster Parliament

Electoral Reform International Services (ERIS)

Dame Audrey Glover, Director

Electoral Reform Society

Havard Hughes, Director of Campaigns
Magnus Smidak, Research and Information Officer

Office of Communications (OFCOM)

Steve Perkins, Head of Content Policy
Adam Higgitt, Public Affairs Manager

British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC)

Ric Bailey, Chief Political Adviser, Chair of the Broadcaster's Liaison Group

The Guardian

Will Woodward, Head of Politics