

Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue

REPORT

by

COMMITTEE
ON ELECTORAL REFORM

*Presented to the Northern Ireland Forum for Political Dialogue
on 31 October 1997*

Adopted 31 OCT 1997

CR15

Note

DRAFT REPORTS

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COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM



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COMMISSION ON THE STATUS OF THE OCEAN



L-R: Mr S Gardiner (Vice-Chairman); Mr S Neeson (Chairman)



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ELECTORAL REFORM

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Following the general election on 1 May and the local government election on 21 May there was concern expressed from a wide spectrum of political, public and business opinion throughout Northern Ireland of 'irregularities' having occurred during these elections. At the plenary meeting of the Forum held on Friday 13 June 1997 the Forum debated this issue and the following motion was consequently resolved:

Given the concerns expressed by a wide spectrum of political, public and business opinion throughout Northern Ireland and the possibility of "irregularities" having occurred in the recent parliamentary and local government elections, this Forum calls on the Government to instigate an early review of voting procedures for all future elections in Northern Ireland and resolves to refer this matter to a Committee which shall prepare a report to recommend methods of countering electoral irregularities - in particular,

- (i) removing multiple entries from the electoral register;
- (ii) ensuring that those who are entitled to vote are registered;
- (iii) providing suitable and convenient polling stations;
- (iv) overcoming postal and proxy vote abuse;
- (v) preventing voting personation by introducing proper and effective identity checks;
- (vi) considering other relevant issues -

and that a Committee shall report to the Forum with a view to submitting such evidence to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for consideration within the Government's review procedure.

A record of the Forum debate is attached at Appendix A.

- 1.2 The first meeting of the Committee was held on Monday 23 June 1997 at which Mr Sean Neeson was elected Chairman. The membership of the Committee is listed at Appendix B.
- 1.3 Advertisements seeking written submissions from interested groups and individuals were placed in the Northern Ireland morning and evening papers. The Committee also wrote to specific groups and organisations listed at Appendix C inviting written and/or oral submissions.
- 1.4 The Committee was keen to ensure cross-community involvement in the review and letters were sent to SDLP Headquarters, Mr Hume, Party Leader and two SDLP members who had spoken publicly about election irregularities, namely Dr Hendron and Councillor Attwood, inviting them to meet with the Committee. However the Committee is disappointed that no reply has been received from any of the aforementioned parties.
- 1.5 In addition, the Committee decided to invite Mr Bradley, Chief Electoral Officer, to give evidence to the Committee as it was considered that he and his staff would be extremely important in providing information for the Committee's review. However Mr Bradley refused to meet with the Committee claiming that he was an independent officer and as a rule did not

meet with bodies of elected representatives such as District Councils or the Forum.

1.6 The Committee made representations to the Secretary of State and the Minister of State, Mr Paul Murphy, to urge them to ask Mr Bradley to meet with the Committee. However they both indicated that Mr Bradley is an independent officer whose duties are clearly established by statute and that it would not be appropriate for either of them to ask him to do anything outwith those duties.

1.7 The Chief Electoral Officer did indicate that he was always prepared to see elected representatives at his office to discuss those matters within his responsibility. However the Committee is deeply disappointed with Mr Bradley's decision and criticises his refusal to meet with a cross-party Committee of democratically elected representatives who were making a serious effort to address the irregularities and anomalies in the electoral system.

1.8 Furthermore the position taken by Mr Bradley in refusing to meet with the Committee was, understandably, also taken by his Deputy Returning Officers and Chief Executives of District Councils who act as Returning Officers for Local Government Elections.

1.9 However the Committee notes that Mr Bradley has been invited to appear before the Northern Ireland Select Committee and awaits the outcome of this meeting with interest.

- 1.10 As a result of the concerns expressed following the recent elections the Government, on 31 July 1997, announced a review of the electoral system in Northern Ireland with a view to announcing a final package of recommendations early 1998. However the Committee notes that the Secretary of State has said that she expects to announce provisional recommendations in November regarding 'vote-stealing'.
- 1.11 The Committee welcomes the prompt action by the Government and has attempted to meet the deadline for the announcement of the provisional recommendations. This report contains the conclusions and recommendations of the Committee based on issues raised during the debate in the Forum and the personal knowledge and experiences of the members of the Committee. Where possible, the Committee's conclusions and recommendations have been substantiated by published material and oral and written evidence which has been provided to the Committee. The use of such material has been detailed where appropriate.
- 1.12 The Committee however reserves the right to make further comments or recommendations following Mr Bradley's appearance before the Northern Ireland Select Committee in November.
- 1.13 The Committee wishes to thank those groups and individuals who provided evidence for this report and who so willingly gave of their time and expertise to assist the Committee in this review.

2. BACKGROUND

2.1 The concept "Vote early, Vote often" has often been quoted with a degree of mirth but vote stealing has been part of the history of Northern Ireland Elections for some time.

2.2 Certain changes have been made to the electoral system in recent years in an attempt to eradicate this problem, such as

- the introduction of identification checks at polling stations before ballot papers are handed over;
- the introduction of a new household canvass system for the collection of completed registration forms by Registration Assistants who would make repeat visits in order to obtain the necessary information. This system replaced the old system which was mainly postal based with an addressed registration form being posted out to known households together with a prepaid addressed envelope for the return, by post, of the completed forms;
- the introduction of a database within the Electoral Office which was property based and allowed the Electoral Office to maintain better control of the number and status of the houses canvassed.

2.3 In order to understand the concerns expressed regarding the electoral system it may be useful at this stage to set out a brief summary of the electoral process.

Electoral Process

Registration

- 2.4 An Electoral register is compiled annually, based on a qualifying date of 15 September and information provided on registration forms completed by householders throughout Northern Ireland. A household registration form is attached at Appendix D of this report. The register is published on 15 February each year, and comes into force on 16 February.
- 2.5 The household registration forms are delivered by the Post Office to each household throughout Northern Ireland and are collected by Registration Assistants who will also assist in the completion of the form if necessary. Householders are required to provide the name, address and previous address for all British Citizens, other Commonwealth citizens, citizens of the Republic of Ireland and other European citizens resident in their household who will be 18 years or over by the qualifying date. Repeat visits are made at the addresses where the Registration Assistants obtained no answer previously and if the repeat visits are unsuccessful the householder is asked to return the form by post to the Electoral Office.

Publication of Register

- 2.6 Registration forms must be with the Electoral Office to enable the publication of a draft register on or before 28 November each year. After the publication of the draft register any person may, within the period specified by the Electoral Office, make a claim to the Chief Electoral Officer to have any incorrect details on the register corrected or to have their name included if it

is not listed on the register. In addition any person can object to the inclusion of any name listed on the register.

- 2.7 Procedures are in place for the consideration of all claims and objections by the Chief Electoral Officer who will, if he cannot reach a decision, pass the claim or objection to the revising officer who will arrange places and times for sittings for the consideration of claims and objections which will allow ample opportunity for all interested parties to appear and be heard.

Application for an Absent Vote

- 2.8 Any elector who does not reasonably expect to be able to vote in person at their polling station because of, for example, physical incapacity, absence from Northern Ireland or because of their occupation can apply to vote by post or to get someone else to vote on their behalf for an indefinite period. A copy of the Application forms are attached at Appendix E.
- 2.9 Applications which are made on grounds of physical incapacity have to be attested by a medical practitioner, a registered nurse within the meaning of Section 10(7) of The Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979 or a Christian Science practitioner. Those applications made on grounds of occupation or employment have to be attested by an employer or someone else in the case of those who are self-employed.
- 2.10 If the Electoral Office is satisfied with the authenticity of the application the elector's name will be added to the permanent standing list of absent voters. This means that these electors do not need to apply for an absent vote at each election. The standing list is reviewed within 3 years of the granting of the

individual applications but enquiries can be made at such other times as the Chief Electoral Officer thinks fit.

- 2.11 In addition any elector who is listed on the electoral register who finds that when an election is called, he/she will not be able to vote in person on the day of the election may apply to vote by post or to get someone else to vote on their behalf. Applications must provide a detailed reason for the need for an absent vote. If the Electoral Office is satisfied with the authenticity of such an application the necessary vote will be sent to the applicant or the proxy.
- 2.12 If an elector moves house, he/she must wait until 15 September next to be registered at the new address and the subsequent 16 February before voting from that address. Electors can therefore only vote at elections in the area where they used to live provided they are registered as electors there but can apply for a postal or proxy vote until such times as they can become registered at their new address. A copy of the application form is included at Appendix E.

Voting

- 2.13 Polling cards are sent out to each individual on the electoral register a few days before polling day. This card gives the date of the election and the polling station to which the elector has been allocated. The elector is not required to produce a polling card to vote. When the elector arrives at the polling station they are directed to a Presiding Officer/Polling Clerk where the elector will be required to produce one of the identity documents listed on the reverse of the household registration form before they are given a ballot

paper. When handed a ballot paper the elector's name is marked on the register.

2.14 There are many aspects of the electoral system which cause widespread concern. This report addresses, in the following chapters, the concerns raised during the debate in the Forum on 13 June 1997 and the subsequent deliberations of the Committee.

3. REMOVING MULTIPLE ENTRIES FROM THE ELECTORAL REGISTER

- 3.1 Under the current electoral process multiple registration is possible in two forms - firstly where people are registered at more than one address within a Parliamentary constituency or District Council area and secondly where people are registered in more than one Parliamentary constituency or District Council area.
- 3.2 Concern has also been expressed that there are cases where discrepancies occur between the house type and the number of entries on the register for that particular address.
- 3.3 Evidence of all of the aforementioned cases was highlighted in a BBC Spotlight programme which was shown in February of this year. The reporters found that in the same block of flats in West Belfast
- 6 people claimed to be tenants at a 1 bedroom flat, none were;
 - 5 residents registered at another 1 bedroom flat could not be traced;
 - 6 people shared another 1 bedroom flat, 3 could not be found; and
 - 2 of 5 people registered at another flat were registered at other addresses within the same constituency as well as at 2 further addresses in a different constituency.
- 3.4 In addition, the same programme reported that at an electoral hearing in December 1996, the SDLP challenged 200 entries on the West Belfast

register with the result that 102 names were removed. The Committee asks what the outcome would be if a similar exercise had been carried out in other constituencies.

3.5 The Committee considers that registering fictitious names or including on the registration form the names of those who are not actually resident at that particular address is made easier under the current system because not all the registration forms are collected from households by Electoral staff but end up being posted to the Electoral Office in a pre-paid envelope. There is nothing therefore to stop anyone from adding fictitious names to the registration form.

The Committee believes that the Chief Electoral Officer has a duty to compile an accurate electoral register by ensuring the collection of forms from every house and to fully investigate all cases where the house type and number of entries for that residence do not match.

3.6 Furthermore the Committee is of the opinion that random checks should be carried out by each local Electoral Office to confirm that information provided on the registration form is correct.

3.7 Additionally, the Committee recommends that a meaningful penalty for not supplying all the required information or for supplying false information should be prominently displayed on the household registration form and that the penalty should be enforced.

3.8 While questions need to be asked when the number of entries for a particular residence do not match the house type the Committee recognises that some such cases will be legitimate as is the case with student accommodation,

hostels or Old People's Homes. However the Committee believes that such genuine cases would be known to the Election Registration Officers.

- 3.9 Evidence from the Association of Electoral Administrators confirmed that multiple registration does not appear to be a problem in Great Britain. This may partially be as a result of the close working relationship that local Electoral Offices in GB have with other related agencies such as the council tax department and the housing and planning departments which enable the Electoral Offices to reconcile information which has been given on the registration forms.
- 3.10 The Association of Electoral Administrators informed the Committee that it believes that Electoral Returning Officers should have the right to access the records of public utilities, the Social Security Agency and the Inland Revenue to check eligibility for registration and that it should be a requirement for the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages to supply details of deaths to the Electoral Returning Officer. **The Committee is persuaded that a duty should be placed on the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages to provide details of deaths to the Chief Electoral Officer. Similarly, because of the reasons detailed in paragraph 4.1 of this report, a duty should be placed on the relevant planning and housing authorities to keep the Electoral Office informed of all new developments throughout the Province. The Committee also believes that the Chief Electoral Officer should consider what further interfaces could be set up with related agencies, for example with the Court Service in respect of prisoners who do not have a right to vote, to ensure that an accurate register is maintained.**

- 3.11 Multiple registrations are not illegal - a person only acts illegally if he/she votes in more than one place. **However the Committee believes that multiple registrations provide the scope for electoral abuse.**
- 3.12 **The Committee recognises that under the present registration system there can be an admissible reason for some people to register at more than one address.** Students studying away from home are a prime example of this where they might choose to be registered at home and there is also an obligation on accommodation authorities to register them at their term-time address. Evidence provided to the Committee also recognised this but suggested that registration forms should be amended to seek additional details regarding the length of the course and possibly the term-time address.
- 3.13 **The Committee however believes that it should be illegal to register at more than one address in a Parliamentary constituency or district council area.**
- 3.14 One problem identified by the Committee is that the present electoral computer system is unable to accurately identify multiple entries because of the limited information requested on the registration form. The present registration form requires householders to list the surname and full forenames of those residents eligible to be registered together with the previous address(es) for anyone who was not resident at that address before the qualifying date. Therefore entries on the electoral computer system can only be compared on this information. **The Committee is convinced that the limited information requested under the current registration process provides the scope for personation and cause for concern under the**

postal and proxy vote system, both of which are addressed later in this report.

- 3.15 It is the Committee's considered view that Electoral Officers will only be able to detect multiple entries if each elector has a personal identifier(s) attached to his/her name. All who provided evidence and indeed, all who spoke during the debate in the Forum, agreed that this was the only safeguard against multiple registration. Such a personal identifier(s) should not necessarily be printed in the published electoral register. It was suggested to the Committee that the household registration form should be revised to request personal identifiers, for example, Date of Birth, National Insurance Number or each person's signature. It was also suggested that the registration form should in future ask if the elector has registered elsewhere.
- 3.16 **The Committee strongly recommends that all registration forms should be revised to request 3 personal identifiers for each elector, namely the elector's Date of Birth, National Insurance Number and Signature.**
- 3.17 **The Committee further recommends that a requirement should be placed on the Chief Electoral Officer to follow-up and take any necessary action regarding previous address details provided on the registration form.**
- 3.18 Identity cards were also suggested by the Association of Electoral Administrators and by Mr Harry Barnes MP. Identity cards are used in various countries, with some countries having an established scheme (Belgium, Germany, Spain) while other countries have a voluntary scheme

(Austria, Denmark, Norway) where the cards are useful for proof of identity. However identity cards are currently not in use in the UK.

3.19 The Association of Electoral Administrators informed the Committee that the Home Office had issued in 1995 a Green Paper on whether there should be a national identity card. The Association advised the Home Office that if it was decided that identity cards should be introduced, then provision should be made for them to be used as a means of identification for registering as an elector, applying for an absent vote and for voting purposes. The Committee notes that the present Government is currently actively examining the recommendations made by the Home Affairs Select Committee to introduce a voluntary identity card scheme linked to plans for a photo-driving licence and that under the recommended scheme it will not be an absolute requirement to possess such an identity card.

3.20 The Committee's conclusions regarding the introduction and use of identity cards has been addressed in Chapter 7 of this report.

3.21 Evidence provided to the Committee by Mr Harry Barnes MP and the Association of Electoral Administrators advocated a rolling electoral register as a way of combating some of the problems caused by multiple registrations. This rolling register would allow records to be updated more easily when people move from place to place and would achieve a more accurate register as there would be no reason for an elector to register at two addresses.

3.22 **While there are certain attractions in a rolling register the Committee recognises that this would require further investigation. The Committee**

believes that this issue could be more appropriately addressed after an accurate electoral register has been compiled.

- 3.23 The Committee notes that the working group set up by the Home Office in 1994 to consider the scope for changes to the registration system considered the idea of a rolling-register. Unfortunately the working group considered the suggestion from the angle of non-registration by those avoiding appearing on the register and their conclusions are therefore of no benefit to the Committee in this review.
- 3.24 The Association of Electoral Administration also suggested that electors could be issued with a registration card confirming that they had been included on the register. At election it could be a requirement that the registration card and polling card should be produced in order to vote. The Committee does not wish to take this suggestion on board.
- 3.25 **The Committee recommends that the Secretary of State should initiate an investigation to fully check the electoral registers for both the General and Local Elections which were held in May 1997 for "irregularities" including multiple registrations.**
- 3.26 **The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should be given the resources ie finance, staff and equipment to enable him to carry out the recommendations cited in this chapter and to maintain an accurate electoral register.**

4. ENSURING THAT THOSE WHO ARE ENTITLED TO VOTE ARE REGISTERED

- 4.1 The Committee was concerned that a number of people had been left off the electoral register for the last two elections and in certain streets three and four houses were completely eliminated even though they were included on the register for previous elections. Concern was also expressed about people who had moved into new housing developments not having been added to the register. **The Committee is convinced that a duty should be placed on the Chief Electoral Officer to ensure that everyone who is entitled to vote is included on the register. The Committee is also convinced that a requirement should be placed on the Chief Electoral Officer to have up-to-date and accurate registers and that the legislation should be amended accordingly.**
- 4.2 **The Committee is further of the opinion that the non-collection of forms by the Electoral Office staff as mentioned in paragraph 3.5 of this report is part of this problem.**
- 4.3 The Committee notes the installation in 1992 of a property-based computer system within the Electoral Office. **The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should fully investigate any gaps in house numbering which appear on the electoral register, attempt to find out why unreturned forms have not been returned and take action as necessary.**
- 4.4 During the debate in the Forum the issue of under-registration was raised. It was suggested that there should be more public information regarding

registration and that consideration should be given to the introduction of a registration system at public places such as banks, Post Offices etc. The Committee believes that the failure of the Electoral Office to be proactive on the issue of under-registration is failing the democratic process. The Committee believes that public information regarding registration should be made more widely available in banks, Post Offices and public places.

- 4.5 The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should organise publicity campaigns by way of electronic and printed media to encourage and promote awareness of registration and other aspects of the electoral process.

5. PROVIDING SUITABLE AND CONVENIENT POLLING STATIONS

- 5.1 During the debate in the Forum reference was made to the unsuitability and location of some polling stations.
- 5.2 Concern was firstly expressed about the inaccessibility of polling stations and polling booths for people with disabilities.
- 5.3 Evidence provided by Mr Harry Barnes referred to the publication by SCOPE called Polls Apart which reported on the findings of a survey regarding the accessibility of polling stations to people with disabilities when they wished to vote on election day. Unfortunately the survey was only conducted throughout Great Britain and did not cover Northern Ireland. However one of the principles within the report indicates that while many people with disabilities have been told that the postal vote is their alternative to accessible voting, people with disabilities continue to reject the idea that voting by post is an adequate or acceptable substitute to voting alongside their neighbours on the day. This finding is borne out by examples cited during the Forum debate:-

'As we go into the next century it is a disgrace that there are still people who have to be lifted out of wheelchairs and carried into polling booths. The indignity for the disabled is beyond belief. I witnessed such a case myself. It shows how seriously some people take their civic duty that they are prepared to put themselves through such indignity.'

' Polling stations in many parts of England Scotland and Wales, unlike those in Northern Ireland, have a much wider booth for people in wheel chairs and that ramps are provided in most cases.'

' It is not just polling stations but also voting booths that are inaccessible '

(13 June 1997, Page 12)

' There were ugly scenes at polling stations when disabled people who came to vote, at considerable difficulty, were not able to gain access to the polling stations, either because of steps or because of blocks at the entrance that would not allow the wheelchair through. That is very embarrassing for a disabled person. When such a voter was unable to get into Elmgrove polling station in East Belfast the people inside showed no willingness to come out and allow that person to vote in the car. Polling stations must be accessible to all those who want to vote.'

(13 June 1997, Page 15)

5.4 Evidence provided to the Committee by Disability Action showed that they receive a lot of complaints regarding the accessibility of some polling stations. Complaints include

- not being able to get up and down steps;
- no car parking close to the polling booths;
- inaccessibility of polling booths for people in wheelchairs.

5.5 During deliberations the Committee also heard how many accessible entrances were locked or unsuitable for people with disabilities and some people voted in the street and in cars.

5.6 One of the working groups set up by the Home Office in 1994 looked at the difficulties experienced by voters with disabilities in entering polling stations or booths. The Home Office report acknowledges that it is not easy to find suitable premises for polling places, and in a number of places buildings which do not provide easy access may have to be used. However the report further indicates that where it is necessary to use a building to which the only means of access is by steps, the Home Departments provide grants towards the purchase of temporary ramps and that additionally grants are also available towards the cost of polling compartments which can be used by people in wheelchairs. The Association of Electoral Administrators confirmed that the Home Office currently makes grants of 50% towards the cost of providing temporary access ramps and 80% for polling screens for voters with disabilities. **The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer satisfies himself that every polling place is used in such a way as to make it accessible to people with disabilities.**

5.7 The location of polling stations was another issue which concerned the Committee. During the debate examples were given of people having to travel some distance to their allocated polling station while passing some other polling stations on the way.

‘. . . . During a recent election in the Upper Bann constituency some people had to travel seven miles, passing two polling stations on the way, to get to one where they were going to vote.’

(13 June 1997, Page 10)

‘. . . . I too have heard of people who, because there is no bus route from one polling station to another, had to walk past two stations and vote at a third. . . .

(13 June 1997, Page 15)

5.8 Concern was also expressed about the location of polling stations in areas where there were deep divisions within the community.

‘In North Antrim one section of a strongly Loyalist area had to vote in a school in a completely Nationalist area. The police told me that they could not guarantee the security of workers in that school yet people are being asked to go there to vote.

‘I had the same problem in the Short Strand. On that occasion the electoral office managed to overcome the difficulty. That should be done where possible.’

(13 June 1997, Page 15)

5.9 The Committee notes that this problem is encountered throughout Northern Ireland by all sections of the community.

5.10 **The Committee is of the opinion that all of these issues are discouraging to those who want to vote and that the Chief Electoral Officer should**

look at where polling stations are sited. The Committee is aware that the Chief Electoral Office publishes every four years a list of polling stations which he intends to use for elections. Objections to any of the stations listed can be made to the Chief Electoral Officer for consideration. However this scheme does not allow for appeals against the allocation of electors to certain polling stations. **The Committee recommends that the published lists of polling stations should be printed in the printed media and that an appeals procedure should be put in place for appeals from the public regarding either the siting of polling stations or the elector's allocation to a certain polling station.**

- 5.11 During their deliberations the Committee also considered the difficulties experienced by those with learning difficulties or sensory disabilities regarding the electoral process. This issue has been addressed in Chapter 8 of this report.

6. OVERCOMING POSTAL AND PROXY VOTE ABUSE

- 6.1 Abuse of the postal or proxy voting system can take a number of forms ranging from individuals being registered or left on the register, who have long since gone elsewhere, and their ballot papers being filled in by others, to vote stealing involving regular non-voters having applications for a postal vote being sent in without their knowledge.
- 6.2 **The Committee gives due recognition to the genuine need for absent voting arrangements for those sections of the community who would otherwise be in effect disenfranchised. The Committee believes that a proper balance must be maintained in a system where people can easily apply for such votes when necessary but where sufficient safeguards prevail to prevent fraudulent applications. The Committee considers that this balance is not present under the current absent voting system**
- 6.3 The Chief Electoral Officer in his Annual Report for 1993-94 details occurrences of serious absent voting abuse in local general elections in 1985 and 1989 and then in the May 1993 local elections. The appropriate extract from the report is attached at Appendix F. In his report Mr Bradley has indicated that under the present regulations relating to absent voting the potential for abuse is considerable and that such abuse can have considerable impact on electoral results. While the Chief Electoral Officer points out that such abuse does take place elsewhere in the United Kingdom he stresses that in Northern Ireland such abuse has far greater potential to influence results as may especially be the case should elections or referenda result from the ongoing political talks.

6.4 One of the concerns expressed during the debate in the Forum was that the actual elector can be unaware of a postal or proxy voting application having been made on his/her behalf. In his 1993-94 report the Chief Electoral Officer states

‘Substantive evidence has built up to indicate that some parents are applying for postal or proxy voting facilities in the names of their sons or daughters who are either permanently or temporarily away from home. It is apparent that a number of such applications have been submitted without the knowledge, let alone the consent, of the family member named. It appears that such parents are much more anxious for their children’s votes to be cast than the electors themselves. So much so that in fact they utter false applications. It is not always the case that sons and daughters share the same identical political affiliations as their parents.’

(Page 21)

The Chief Electoral Officer continues

‘My Office has contacted a number of electors for whom absent voting facilities have been requested. The replies received stated that the electors did not request any such facility and certainly had not signed any application. Comparisons between the signatures on the replies and on the application forms certainly have borne that out. When the police have investigated the matter the electors invariably decline to repeat their original statement.’

(Page 22)

6.5 Other concerns expressed during the Forum debate regarding the postal voting arrangements included the increase in the number of applications for postal and proxy votes and the significant variance in the number and percentage of postal ballot papers issued in the different constituencies throughout Northern Ireland. Statistics regarding postal and proxy votes which are attached at Appendix G show the reason for the concern in these areas. The Chief Electoral Officer in his 1988-89 Annual Report acknowledges the differences in the level of postal voting from area to area.

'There are significant differences in the level of postal voting from area to area. Some of the differences may be accounted for in the varying level of physically handicapped persons or the differing age profile of the population from district to district. The major factor, however, appears to be the level of political interest. Indeed, the various polling agents and candidates play the major role in the procurement of such postal voting applications whilst a much smaller number of applications is obtained directly from electors.'

(1988-89 Report, Pages 6 and 7)

6.6 The Committee is of the opinion that the postal and proxy vote system is susceptible to abuse by those applying for fraudulent votes in that the specified documents which are required to be produced at a polling station before a ballot paper is handed over do not have to be produced before an absentee ballot is issued.

6.7 The Committee is disappointed to note that while the Chief Electoral Officer acknowledges in his 1993-94 report that there is serious absent voting abuse

he does not unfortunately provide any suggestions for the improvement of the current system. However in a newspaper article in the Daily Mail on 24 May 1997 Mr Bradley is reported to have suggested that identity cards should be used to stop future abuse and in a further article in the Financial Times on 7 August 1997 Mr Bradley is reported to have said that further steps should be taken to pre-empt abuse by keeping a digital profile of voters' signatures and an historical record of postal voters as well as monitoring the doctors' attestations provided on postal applications.

- 6.8 The Committee noted the concern registered during the Forum debate that some doctors attest many more forms than some others. However, the Minister, Mr Paul Murphy MP in answer to a Parliamentary Question regarding the number of applications signed by individual doctors stated

‘Records of absent voting applications are not currently stored in a way which would readily provide information on reasons for applications and individual doctors attestations.’

- 6.9 **The Committee is pleased to note that Mr Bradley acknowledges the concern expressed about doctors' attestations and therefore particularly welcomes all of Mr Bradley's proposals suggested in the article on 7 August to pre-empt abuse. The Committee is disturbed that such steps had not been taken at an earlier date given that Mr Bradley has identified serious absent voting abuse over many years.**

- 6.10 In his 1993-94 report the Chief Electoral Officer confirms that he has already referred to the police investigations carried out on suspected electoral abuse. However he goes on to say

'The police have particular difficulties in carrying out their investigations including the following:

- where the alleged applicants are outside of Northern Ireland it is particularly difficult to obtain an interview even with the assistance of the other police forces;
- even when it was clearly established that applicants did not even know the proxy or assentor the investigation was thwarted when the proxy or assentor denied signing the form and refused handwriting samples;
- in some instances involving absent or severely infirmed voters, and where all the signatures on the forms were suspected to be false, the investigation could not proceed as specimen signatures were not available.'

(Page 22)

6.11 **The Committee notes that Mr Bradley opened a postal vote centre for two and half months before the elections this year in an effort to allow people to get their postal and proxy votes sorted out. However, the Committee is of the opinion that those who seek to abuse the postal and proxy vote system will not make an early application which would permit the Chief Electoral Officer to carry out the necessary checks. The Committee further considers that such a centre should be tied to each local Electoral Office as local knowledge is absolutely essential in investigating postal or proxy votes. Furthermore, the Committee is of**

the opinion that each local Electoral Office should be staffed to enable the necessary work to be effectively completed.

6.12 **The Committee also considers that fraudulent applications for postal and proxy votes are made easier by the ability to see the marked register which is available for purchase following an election.** Political parties acknowledge the usefulness of the marked registers in identifying people who have not voted and in finding out why a party has lost favour with that particular group of electors. However the availability of the marked register also makes it easier for perpetrators to apply for fraudulent proxy or postal votes on behalf of those who do not vote. Suggestions to avoid this sort of fraud included written confirmation to the applicant that the proxy or postal application had been granted. The elector would then have an opportunity to object if a fraudulent application was made in his/her name and the Chief Electoral Officer could take action to ensure that the false ballot paper was not cast. **The Committee has reservations about the availability of marked registers following elections given the scope that they provide for abuse.**

6.13 The Association of Electoral Administrators suggested to the Committee that 'early voting' ie voting on specified days in advance of polling day, at a single location in each constituency or Council area would give electors who are unable to vote in person on polling day, the opportunity to cast a vote in person before polling day and would therefore cut down on the need for many of the postal and proxy votes.

6.14 The Association also suggested that voters who are unable to vote due to illness or infirmity could receive a visit from polling officers with a mobile

ballot box and ballot papers so that the elector could vote in person at his/her home. The Association confirmed that this is what happens in South Africa and points out that such a system gives the elector the opportunity to be directly involved, is better than sending complicated instructions through the post, is also far more flexible in terms of unforeseen illness and reduces the risk of fraud.

- 6.15 The Committee, as part of its deliberations, looked at how proxy and postal votes are dealt with in other countries. A summary of the information which was provided to the Committee is attached at Appendix H.
- 6.16 **The Committee is of the opinion that consideration should be given to allow the long-term sick to vote at home by way of an electoral officer calling on them at home.**
- 6.17 **Following lengthy deliberations the Committee recommends that application forms for postal and proxy votes should be revised to request the Date of Birth and National Insurance Number of the applicant and that when applications for postal or proxy votes are received, the Chief Electoral Officer should be required to make checks on identity before registration is accepted.**
- 6.18 **The Committee also recommends that an earlier deadline for the receipt of applications for postal and proxy votes has to be set to allow the local Electoral Office time to carry out the necessary checks and that late applications should only be accepted if the elector has a due reason why an application could not have been made earlier.**

6.19 The Committee also concludes that the household registration form should be revised to ask each elector to indicate whether they have any disabilities, physical incapacities, or if his/her work regularly takes him/her away from home etc and as a result may therefore require a postal or proxy vote. This registration form should also warn the elector that if he/she does not apply for a postal or proxy vote in sufficient time he/she may not get such a vote. The Committee believes that there is no reason why applications for an absent vote for an indefinite period should not be made before 31 December.

7. PREVENTING VOTING PERSONATION BY INTRODUCING PROPER AND EFFECTIVE IDENTITY CHECKS

7.1 Personation is another area of concern with regard to vote-stealing and one which was repeatedly raised during the debate in the Forum.

7.2 Under the present system an elector is required to provide one of the following specified documents before he/she is handed a ballot paper:

- (a) a current Northern Ireland or Great Britain full driving licence or a Northern Ireland provisional licence (in each case both parts of the licence have to be produced);
- (b) a current United Kingdom or Republic of Ireland passport (including a UK Visitor's Passport) or other current European Union State Passport;
- (c) a current book for the payment of allowances, benefits or pensions issued by the Department of Health and Social Services for Northern Ireland;
- (d) a medical card issued by the Northern Ireland Central Services Agency (no other medical card is acceptable);
- (e) a current British Seaman's card;

(f) a card made of plastic issued by the Department of Health and Social Security or the Department of Social Security with a name and national insurance number embossed on it;

(g) in the case of a woman married within 2 years of polling day, a certified copy or extract of an entry of marriage issued by a Registrar General in the UK.

7.3 Widespread concern has been expressed about the inclusion of the non-photographic documents in the list of specified documents such as Medical cards, allowance or benefit books or plastic card with National Insurance Number.

7.4 Evidence provided to the Committee by a few who had officiated at elections indicated that misuse of these documents does indeed happen.

'In my position I could personally identify voters impersonating using allowance books etc but needless to say it is not my duty as Presiding Officer to refuse.'

(Presiding Officer)

'I have observed blatant impersonation on a large scale. Introduction of an election identity card is essential. Passports and Driving Licences are OK but benefit books and Plastic National Insurance Cards are a sham.'

(Poll Clerk & Presiding Officer)

7.5 An example quoted in the Forum debate indicated that on one constituency about 70% of electors use medical cards or benefit books. Throughout the debate other examples were given regarding the misuse of non-photographic identification.

'.....we have evidence that medical cards too have been reproduced.'

(13 June 1997, Page 10)

'One Presiding Officer said to me that he had never seen so many brand new medical cards. There is also a problem with regard to social-security benefit books.'

(13 June 1997, Page 12)

'I know of a Roman Catholic polling officer who was so embarrassed by what he saw in his local station that when it came to the council election he requested to be moved to another station. He could not allow it to go on. He himself could not object to people coming in eight or nine times to vote, but he was so embarrassed that he asked to be moved to another station'.

(13 June 1997, Page 19)

7.6 The Chief Electoral Officer in his 1993-94 report acknowledges that concern has been expressed about the appropriateness of the inclusion of medical cards in the list of prescribed documents as those cards are relatively easy to forge. However the Chief Electoral Officer points out that there is nevertheless the additional safeguard of the right of a polling agent to

challenge an elector at the polling station including the right to have an arrest effected on grounds of alleged personation.

7.7 The Committee however recognises that it is difficult to identify the perpetrators as they will in most cases cast the fraudulent vote first and then return later to cast the legal vote - any challenges would therefore be on the legal vote!

7.8 However the Committee is of the opinion that the list of specified documents which an elector is required to provide before he/she is handed a ballot paper is open to abuse and strongly believes that the list is being abused.

7.9 One other area of the electoral procedure which has been used for vote-stealing and personation is where information regarding who has and has not voted is being taken out of the polling stations. The Committee recommends that the Presiding Officer should be empowered to stop information being removed from the polling station.

7.10 All of those who provided evidence to the Committee, in addition to all of those who expressed concern during the Forum debate, advocated that photographic identification was the only way to identify an elector. However documents that do not have a photograph cannot simply be disallowed unless there is an alternative that people can use. Evidence provided to the Committee recognised that not all electors possess a driving licence or passport but stated they probably do possess some photographic document which would confirm proof of identity such as bus passes, security passes etc.

- 7.11 There was also support for a national identity card which could also assist with matters such as state benefits and driver licensing.
- 7.12 The Association of Electoral Administrators suggested that if electors were issued with a registration card confirming they had been included on the register, at an election it could be a requirement that the registration card and the poll card should be produced in order to vote.
- 7.13 The Committee, as part of its deliberations, looked at procedures used by other countries for the prevention of personation. A summary of the information which was provided to the Committee is attached at Appendix I.
- 7.14 **The Committee strongly recommends that in the first instance the legislation should be amended to require photographic identification to be produced before a voting paper is handed over.**
- 7.15 **In addition, the Committee believes that consideration should also be given to implementing procedures whereby each elector would be required to sign the electoral register and a comparison of the signature on the register and the one which was provided on the registration form, made by polling station officials before a voting paper is handed over.**
- 7.16 However the Committee believes that the Government should also consider the introduction of one of the three options for identity cards listed below as a requirement for identification before a voting paper is handed over:

- a National Identity Card which could be used in association with other matters;
- a Voting Identity Card which all electors would have to produce before a voting paper is handed over;
- a Voting Identity Card for those electors who do not have the appropriate photographic identification.

7.17 The Committee is also of the opinion that consideration should be given to putting invisible, indelible, fluorescent dye on a specified thumb or finger of each elector which would be checked by polling station officials under an ultra-violet lamp before issuing a ballot paper. While this process may seem undignified for the voter the Committee believes that it would certainly add to the integrity of the voting process. The Committee notes that this process was introduced without controversy in recent elections in Bosnia, South Africa, Cambodia and Albania.

7.18 The Committee believes that it should be the clear duty of the Presiding Officer to refuse to issue a ballot paper if there is doubt about a voter's identity and that an objection from a candidate's polling agent should not be required. However, there should be provision for the issue of a 'tendered' ballot paper in the case of a dispute about identity documentation.

OTHER RELEVANT ISSUES

8. Difficulties experienced by those with learning difficulties

8.1 During the Committee's deliberations concerns were expressed on various issues additional to those which were specifically identified in the motion passed by the Forum.

8.2 One such concern was regarding the difficulties experienced by those with learning difficulties. Evidence provided to the Committee by Mencap informed the Committee that a research project was carried out by Mencap in 1996 to look at the barriers faced by people with a learning disability. Although the research project did not include Northern Ireland, Mencap confirmed that contact with carers and organisations working with people with a learning disability in Northern Ireland suggests that the experiences in Northern Ireland are very similar. Amongst the barriers highlighted are the following:

- lack of knowledge that people with a learning disability can vote;
- the absence of information in an accessible format to explain the electoral procedures, voting papers or the manifestos of each candidate or party;
- the absence of accessible polling stations - not only in terms of physical access, but accessible by the use of signs, pictures, independent support etc;

- the lack of facilities available at the polling stations to allow staff or carers to explain the voting form and procedures to the individual with a learning disability and for the person with a learning disability to be comfortable and confident in unfamiliar surroundings;
- the lack of experience of voting by individuals with a learning disability, coupled with the infrequent nature of elections;
- the absence of transport to get to the polling station;
- the absence of an independent advocate, known to the person with a learning disability, who would assist him or her in marking their ballot paper. Whilst acknowledging the need to prevent fraudulent use of the voting procedures, it is important to recognise that the offer of help from the Presiding Officer - a stranger to the potential voter - can result in a person with a learning disability not exercising their right to vote.

8.3 Mencap believe that a number of individuals and organisations have a role to play in encouraging people with a learning disability to vote but that in the absence of clear policies or guidelines issued by Government at central or Northern Ireland levels on this matter, coupled with the lack of training for Electoral Office staff about the needs of people with a learning disability, mean that many do not exercise their right to vote.

8.4 **The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should liaise with organisations such as Mencap to discuss training for his staff and how the registration and voting procedures could be revised to encourage people with learning difficulties to vote.**

Difficulties experienced by those with sensory difficulties

- 8.5 The Committee also wrote to the RNID, RNIB and SENSE regarding difficulties encountered by people with sensory difficulties. However, at the time of writing this report no replies have been received.
- 8.6 The Committee acknowledges that there are general problems regarding the electoral system faced by people with sensory disabilities and **recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should liaise with organisations such as RNID, RNIB and SENSE to discuss how these difficulties might be overcome.**

Difficulties experienced by security forces regarding registration and voting

- 8.7 Two other issues which the Committee was asked to consider were
- the difficulties experienced by security personnel working on the day of the election; and
 - the security risk of names and addresses of security personnel appearing on the electoral register.
- 8.8 Representations made to the Committee stated that authorities had promised to arrange postal votes for security personnel who had to work on the day of the election but that the postal votes had not materialised. Existing provisions within the electoral procedures allows for security personnel who are unable to vote at their allocated polling station because they are working on polling

day to be, on presentation of a prescribed certificate, permitted to vote at any polling station within the same Parliamentary constituency or District Council electoral area as their allocated polling station. However, frequently security personnel are posted to work in areas outside the Parliamentary constituency or District Council electoral area of their allocated polling station and they are therefore unable to cast their vote. **The Committee believes that the existing provisions for such cases are not satisfactory and recommends that a duty should be placed on senior members of the security forces to apply for postal votes for those members of the security forces for whom they are responsible.**

8.9 Representations were also made to the Committee regarding the security risk which arises when the names and addresses of security personnel appear on the electoral register.

8.10 The Committee notes that in Australia, for example 'silent enrolment' is offered. Electors who consider that the publication of their address on the publicly available electoral roll would endanger the personal safety of themselves or their families, may make a request to the Divisional Returning Officer that their addresses not appear, or be deleted from, the roll. A request must give details of the relevant risk and be verified by statutory declaration.

8.11 **The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should put in place procedures to allow members of the security forces to apply for the non-inclusion of their addresses on the published electoral register and to set up procedures to enable him to approve and take the necessary action on such applications. The Committee is of the opinion that there may be circumstances in which others (for example, those at**

risk from an ex-spouse) should have the opportunity to avail of this procedure.

Non-delivery of polling cards

- 8.12. One of the other issues raised during the debate in the Forum was the non-delivery of polling cards and personal literature of some candidates. The Committee is aware that there appears to have been problems in recent elections concerning late printing of polling cards. **The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should take action to ensure early delivery of poll cards.** Evidence provided to the Committee by Royal Mail indicates that difficulties have been experienced by their organisation in ensuring unaddressed literature is delivered within the correct constituency and that this situation would be improved if they could access constituency details held by the Chief Electoral Officer.
- 8.13 The Royal Mail also indicated in their evidence that the registration form as currently designed does not include any space for postcode details. Consequently poll cards and other addressed items do not have postcodes included as part of the address format.
- 8.14 **The Committee recommends that the registration form should be revised to ask for postcode and that the Chief Electoral Officer should liaise with the Royal Mail to discuss what other procedures could be put in place to help establish an effective system for sending out election literature and polling cards.**

Registration of homeless people

8.15 Mr Harry Barnes MP, informed the Committee that he has campaigned for the registration of homeless people which is not possible under the current registration system which requires electors to be 'a resident' in order to be registered. Mr Barnes pointed out that as a resident is normally somebody who is expected to have a residence by definition that almost always excludes homeless people. Mr Barnes stated that he would like to see the definition changed to allow homeless people to be added or, in the meantime, the appropriate Government office putting out circulars to encourage a more liberal interpretation of the present arrangement.

8.16 The Committee notes the case made by Mr Barnes but has reservations about his desired change which the Committee believe would give rise to potential abuse. The Committee believes however that provision should be made for those who are resident in recognised accommodation for example, Salvation Army, Simon Community, Women's Aid Refuge.

9. SUMMARY OF THE COMMITTEE'S CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- 9.1 This chapter provides a summary of the conclusions and recommendations identified in this report. The recommendations are presented as a package and as such are dependent on each other to provide an effective and fair electoral system.
- 9.2 The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should be provided with the necessary finance, staff and equipment to enable the recommendations in this report to be carried out satisfactorily.
- 9.3 Where recommendations are not already provided for under current legislation the Committee recommends that the legislation should be amended accordingly or that appropriate procedures are established to ensure that recommendations are carried out.

REMOVING MULTIPLE ENTRIES FROM THE ELECTORAL REGISTER

- The Committee believes that the Chief Electoral Officer has a duty to compile an accurate electoral register by ensuring the collection of forms from every house and to fully investigate all cases where the house type and number of entries for that residence do not match. (Para 3.5)
- Furthermore the Committee is of the opinion that random checks should be carried out by each local Electoral Office to confirm that information provided on the registration form is correct. (Para 3.6)

- Additionally, the Committee recommends that a meaningful penalty for not supplying all the required information or for supplying false information should be prominently displayed on the household registration form and that the penalty should be enforced. (Para 3.7)

- The Committee recognises that some cases where the house type and number of entries for that residence do not match will be legitimate as is the case with student accommodation, hostels or Old People's Homes. However the Committee believes that such genuine cases would be known to the Election Registration Officers. (Para 3.8)

- The Committee is persuaded that a duty should be placed on the Registrar of Births, Deaths and Marriages to provide details of deaths to the Chief Electoral Officer. Similarly, a duty should be placed on the relevant planning and housing authorities to keep the Electoral Office informed of all new developments throughout the Province. The Committee also believes that the Chief Electoral Officer should consider what further interfaces could be set up with related agencies, for example with the Court Service in respect of prisoners who do not have the right to vote, to ensure that an accurate register is maintained. (Para 3.10)

- The Committee believes that multiple registrations provide the scope for electoral abuse. (Para 3.11)

- **The Committee recognises that under the present registration system there can be an admissible reason for some people to register at more than one address. (Para 3.12)**
- **The Committee however believes that it should be illegal to register at more than one address in a Parliamentary constituency or district council area. (Para 3.13)**
- **The Committee is convinced that the limited information requested under the current registration process provides the scope for personation and cause for concern under the postal and proxy vote system. (Para 3.14)**
- **The Committee strongly recommends that all registration forms should be revised to request 3 personal identifiers for each elector, namely the elector's Date of Birth, National Insurance Number and Signature. (Para 3.16)**
- **The Committee further recommends that a requirement should be placed on the Chief Electoral Officer to follow-up and take any necessary action regarding previous address details provided on the registration form. (Para 3.17)**
- **While there are certain attractions in a rolling register the Committee recognises that this would require further investigation. The Committee believes that this issue could be more appropriately**

addressed after an accurate electoral register has been compiled.
(Para 3.22)

- The Committee recommends that the Secretary of State should initiate an investigation to fully check the electoral registers for both the General and Local Elections which were held in May 1997 for "irregularities" including multiple registrations. (Para 3.25)
- The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should be given the resources ie finance, staff and equipment to enable him to carry out the recommendations cited in this chapter and to maintain an accurate electoral register. (Para 3.26)

ENSURING THAT THOSE WHO ARE ENTITLED TO VOTE ARE REGISTERED

- The Committee is convinced that a duty should be placed on the Chief Electoral Officer to ensure that everyone who is entitled to vote is included on the register. The Committee is also convinced that a requirement should be placed on the Chief Electoral Officer to have up-to-date and accurate registers and that the legislation should be amended accordingly. (Para 4.1)
- The Committee is further of the opinion that the non-collection of forms by the Electoral Office staff as mentioned in paragraph 3.5 of this report is part of the problem whereby people are being left off the register. (Para 4.2)

- **The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should fully investigate any gaps in house numbering which appear on the electoral register, attempt to find out why unreturned forms have not been returned and take action as necessary. (Para 4.3)**

- **The Committee believes that the failure of the Electoral Office to be proactive on the issue of under-registration is failing the democratic process. The Committee believes that public information regarding registration should be made more widely available in banks, Post Offices and public places. (Para 4.4)**

- **The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should organise publicity campaigns by way of electronic and printed media to encourage and promote awareness of registration and other aspects of the electoral process. (Para 4.5)**

PROVIDING SUITABLE AND CONVENIENT POLLING STATIONS

- **The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer satisfies himself that every polling place is used in such a way as to make it accessible to people with disabilities. (Para 5.6)**

- **The Committee is of the opinion that all of these issues (paras 5.7 to 5.9) are discouraging to those who want to vote and that the Chief Electoral Officer should look at where polling stations are sited. (Para 5.10)**

- The Committee recommends that the published lists of polling stations should be printed in the printed media and that an appeals procedure should be put in place for appeals from the public regarding the siting of polling stations or the elector's allocation to a certain polling station. (Para 5.10)

OVERCOMING POSTAL AND PROXY VOTE ABUSE

- The Committee gives due recognition to the genuine need for absent voting arrangements for those sections of the community who would otherwise be in effect disenfranchised. The Committee believes that a proper balance must be maintained in a system where people can easily apply for such votes when necessary but where sufficient safeguards prevail to prevent fraudulent applications. The Committee considers that this balance is not present under the current absent voting system. (Para 6.2)
- The Committee is of the opinion that the postal and proxy vote system is susceptible to abuse by those applying for fraudulent votes in that the specified documents which are required to be produced at a polling station before a ballot paper is handed over do not have to be produced before an absentee ballot is issued. (Para 6.6)
- The Committee is pleased to note that Mr Bradley acknowledges the concern expressed about doctors' attestations and therefore particularly welcomes all of Mr Bradley's proposals suggested in the article in the Financial Times on 7 August 1997 to pre-empt abuse. The Committee is disturbed that such steps had not been taken at an

earlier date given that Mr Bradley has identified serious absent voting abuse over many years. (Para 6.9)

- The Committee notes that Mr Bradley opened a postal vote centre for two and half months before the elections this year in an effort to allow people to get their postal and proxy votes sorted out. However, the Committee is of the opinion that those who seek to abuse the postal and proxy vote system will not make an early application which would permit the Chief Electoral Officer to carry out the necessary checks. The Committee further considers that such a centre should be tied to each local electoral office as local knowledge is absolutely essential in investigating postal or proxy votes. Furthermore, the Committee is of the opinion that each local electoral office should be staffed to enable the necessary work to be effectively completed. (Para 6.11)
- The Committee also considers that fraudulent applications for postal and proxy votes are made easier by the ability to see the marked register which is available for purchase following an election. (Para 6.12)
- The Committee has reservations about the availability of marked registers following elections given the scope that they provide for abuse. (Para 6.12)
- The Committee is of the opinion that consideration should be given to allow the long-term sick to vote at home by way of an electoral officer calling on them at home. (Para 6.16)

- The Committee recommends that application forms for postal and proxy votes should be revised to request the Date of Birth and National Insurance Number of the applicant and that when applications for postal or proxy votes are received, the Chief Electoral Officer should be required to make checks on identity before registration is accepted. (Para 6.17)

- The Committee also recommends that an earlier deadline for the receipt of applications for postal and proxy votes has to be set to allow the local Electoral Office time to carry out the necessary checks and that late applications should only be accepted if the elector has a due reason why an application could not have been made earlier. (Para 6.18)

- The Committee also concludes that the household registration form should be revised to ask each elector to indicate whether they have any disabilities, physical incapacities, or if his/her work regularly takes him/her away from home etc and as a result may therefore require a postal or proxy vote. This registration form should also warn the elector that if he/she does not apply for a postal or proxy vote in sufficient time he/she may not get such a vote. The Committee believes that there is no reason why applications for an absent vote for an indefinite period should not be made before 31 December. (Para 6.19)

PREVENTING VOTING PERSONATION BY INTRODUCING PROPER AND EFFECTIVE IDENTITY CHECKS

- The Committee recognises that it is difficult to identify the perpetrators as they will in most cases cast the fraudulent vote first and then return later to cast the legal vote - any challenges would therefore be on the legal vote! (Para 7.7)
- The Committee is of the opinion that the list of specified documents which an elector is required to provide before he/she is handed a ballot paper is open to abuse and strongly believes that the list is being abused. (Para 7.8)
- The Committee recommends that the Presiding Officer should be empowered to stop information being removed from the polling station. (Para 7.9)
- The Committee strongly recommends that in the first instance the legislation should be amended to require photographic identification to be produced before a voting paper is handed over. (Para 7.14)
- In addition, the Committee believes that consideration should also be given to implementing procedures whereby each elector would be required to sign the electoral register and a comparison of the signature on the register and the one which was provided on the registration form, made by polling station officials before a voting paper is handed over. (Para 7.15)

- However the Committee believes that the Government should also consider the introduction of one of the three options for identity cards listed below as a requirement for identification before a voting paper is handed over:
 - a National Identity Card which could be used in association with other matters;
 - a Voting Identity Card which all electors would have to produce before a voting paper is handed over;
 - a Voting Identity Card for those electors who do not have the appropriate photographic identification. (Para 7.16)

- The Committee is also of the opinion that consideration should be given to putting invisible, indelible, fluorescent dye on a specified thumb or finger of each elector which would be checked by polling station officials under an ultra-violet lamp before issuing a ballot paper. While this process may seem undignified for the voter the Committee believes that it would certainly add to the integrity of the voting process. The Committee notes that this process was introduced without controversy in recent elections in Bosnia, South Africa, Cambodia and Albania. (Para 7.17)

- The Committee believes that it should be the clear duty of the Presiding Officer to refuse to issue a ballot paper if there is doubt about a voter's identity and that an objection from a candidate's polling agent should not be required. However, there should be

provision for the issue of a 'tendered' ballot paper in the case of a dispute about identity documentation. (Para 7.18)

OTHER RELEVANT ISSUES

Difficulties experienced by those with learning difficulties

- The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should liaise with organisations such as Mencap to discuss training for his staff and how the registration and voting procedures could be revised to encourage people with learning difficulties to vote. (Para 8.4)

Difficulties experienced by those with sensory difficulties

- The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should liaise with organisations such as RNID, RNIB and SENSE to discuss how the difficulties faced by people with sensory difficulties might be overcome. (Para 8.6)

Difficulties experienced by security forces regarding registration and voting

- The Committee believes that the existing provisions for security personnel who have to work on the day of the election are not satisfactory and recommends that a duty should be placed on senior members of the security forces to apply for postal votes for those members of the security forces for whom they are responsible. (Para 8.8)

- The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should put in place procedures to allow members of the security forces to apply for the non-inclusion of their addresses on the published electoral register and to set up procedures to enable him to approve and take the necessary action on such applications. The Committee is of the opinion that there may be circumstances in which others (for example, those at risk from an ex-spouse) should have the opportunity to avail of this procedure. (Para 8.11)

Non-delivery of polling cards

- The Committee recommends that the Chief Electoral Officer should take action to ensure early delivery of poll cards. (Para 8.12)
- The Committee recommends that the registration form should be revised to ask for postcode and that the Chief Electoral Officer should liaise with the Royal Mail to discuss what other procedures could be put in place to help establish an effective system for sending out election literature and polling cards. (Para 8.14)

Registration of homeless people

- The Committee notes the case made by Mr Barnes but has reservations about his desired change which the Committee believes would give rise to potential abuse. The Committee believes however that provision should be made for those who are resident in recognised accommodation for example, Salvation Army, Simon Community, Women's Aid Refuge. (Para 8.16)

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 13 June 1997

ELECTIONS (IRREGULARITIES)

Mr Hugh King to make the following notes.

Given the repeated assurances from a wide range of political, public and business opinion throughout Northern Ireland about the possibility of "long running" having occurred in the recent parliamentary and local government elections, this Forum calls on the Government to instigate an independent review of voting procedures for all future elections in Northern Ireland, with a view to having a fair and equitable system, with "long running" identity checks on all voters to be used.

APPENDIX A

I would like to refer to the opportunity to discuss in my debate on the long running cases at irregularities that may have occurred in recent elections — some of the evidence of this is a number that was not reported by those who set it up. The entire process is in need of investigation — from the sampling of electoral registers.

RECORD OF DEBATE

13 JUNE 1997

Given De Henderson's comments on the irregularities at single addresses and, indeed, individual voters, there must surely be cause for concern. In my own area there are many examples of people on the local electoral register who are known to be residents and working in Liverpool or indeed, New York. No less a person than the Chief Electoral Officer has publicly expressed concern at the substantial increase in the numbers of postal-vote and proxy-vote applications. One suggests that it is difficult for someone to get to a polling station if he happens to live in New York.

Of course, we all have insights about what are acceptable means of identity for those intending to exercise the franchise. Indeed, during a debate in my own context — the new register Members — Miss Fear too were concerned about this matter. They queried the case of a man going to vote — I presume that he was a member of the party — who produced a driving certificate which they were at pains to point out, had been issued by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. It is interesting to note that they may have been giving the registration to our very decent police force.

On Thursday evening, after the local government elections, I received a call from a policeman who had had to catch, watching individuals' entry polling booths late at the time, apparently using different medical cards, without challenge. He also saw individuals finding that their vote had already been utilized.

I am sure that all the parties attending the Forum have their own concerns. The SRP, who unfortunately are not with us, have called foul. Their call has brought an accusation of

APPENDIX A

RECORD OF DEBATE

13 JUNE 1907

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

Friday 13 June 1997

ELECTIONS (IRREGULARITIES)

Mr Hussey: I beg to move the following motion:

Given the concerns expressed from a wide spectrum of political, public and business opinion throughout Northern Ireland about the possibility of "irregularities" having occurred in the recent parliamentary and local government elections, this Forum calls on the Government to instigate an immediate review of voting procedures for all future elections in Northern Ireland, with a view to having a fair and equitable system, with proper and tangible identity checks on all seeking to vote.

I intend to be brief in order to allow the whole body an opportunity to contribute to the debate on this non-contentious motion, which expresses concern at irregularities that may have occurred in recent elections — abuse of the system or use of it in a manner that was not intended by those who set it up. The entire process is in need of investigation — from the compiling of electoral registers to the individual exercise of the franchise. I hope also to address concerns that have been expressed in the amendment that is to be moved.

Given Dr Hendron's successful investigation into multiple registrations at single addresses and, indeed, individual registrations at multiple addresses, there must surely be cause for concern. In my own area there are many examples of people on the local electoral register who are known to be resident and working in Donegal or, indeed, New York. No less a person than the Chief Electoral Officer has publicly expressed concern at the massive increase in the numbers of postal-vote and proxy-vote applications. One supposes that it is difficult for someone to get to a polling station if he happens to live in New York.

Of course, we all have misgivings about what are acceptable means of identity for those intending to exercise the franchise. Indeed, during a debate in my own council — this may surprise Members — Sinn Fein too were concerned about this matter. They quoted the case of a man going to vote — I presume that he was a member of the party — who produced a firearms certificate which, they were at pains to point out, had been issued by the Royal Ulster Constabulary. It is interesting to note that they may have been giving due recognition to our very decent police force.

On Thursday evening, after the local-government elections, I received a call from a policeman who had had to endure watching individuals enter polling booths four or five times, obviously using different medical cards, without challenge. He also saw individuals finding that their votes had already been claimed.

I am sure that all the parties attending the Forum have their own concerns. The SDLP, who unfortunately are not with us, have called foul. That call has brought an accusation of

whinging from Sinn Fein, which surely indicates that they would claim to have nothing to fear from any investigation.

Contributions from other Members will no doubt be enlightening, with many examples of irregularities, practical solutions and possible remedies, which, via the Record of Debate, should give good guidance to the Government during their review. Solutions could indeed lead to a change in the United Kingdom's system. They could result in the remedying of difficulties that are beginning to arise on the mainland, where ethnic minorities are beginning to learn from the minorities in Northern Ireland.

I intended to be brief because this is something that Members throughout the Chamber will want to discuss in real depth. I close by stating that the purpose of this motion is not to disenfranchise anyone but to ensure that those entitled to vote — I stress the word “entitled” — can do so. It is to ensure that their votes are there when they go to the polling stations.

10.15 am

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: I beg to move the following amendment: Leave out all the words of the motion and insert

“This Forum believes that the democratic process is undermined and endangered by electoral abuse and resolves to expeditiously appoint a Committee to prepare a report recommending methods of countering electoral irregularities — in particular,

- (i) removing multiple entries from the electoral register,
- (ii) ensuring that those who are entitled to vote are registered,
- (iii) providing suitable and convenient polling stations,
- (iv) overcoming postal and proxy vote abuse,
- (v) preventing voting personation,
- (vi) considering other relevant issues.

The Committee, which shall be empowered to appoint experts and take evidence from within, and to study procedures outside, Northern Ireland, shall report to the Forum, with a view to submitting its evidence to the Secretary of State, to be considered as part of an urgent review of practice and procedures for elections in Northern Ireland.”

In a democracy, the machinery of voting is the foundation, and if the machinery is not accurate and the voting is not honest we do not get fair representation, no matter what percentage of people vote. We cannot even tell whether the percentage is accurate. This is a very serious matter, on which the Government must be pressed because there are many issues that need to be addressed.

One of the first of these is identification. No paper can properly identify a person unless it carries a photograph. It is nonsense to say that a pension book or a medical card will do. I know from experience that in areas of Northern Ireland agents of Sinn Fein have had pocketfuls of medical cards. I also know that when legitimate Sinn Fein voters told agents

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that they had forgotten their medical card, they were simply given another and used someone else's name to vote. That is how they got their numbers. Such activity went on regularly during the voting, and it was reflected in the results. Of course, the people involved concentrated in areas that they knew would give them good results.

The first thing that we have got to say to the Government is that no means of identification should be acceptable unless it bears a photograph. If Ministers do not start to work on this, they will never get the system right. There will always be opportunities for abuse.

Another thing that I want to know is how Sinn Fein obtained information about the students who had left Northern Ireland. They have a complete list. Many of those young people were taken off the electoral register, but others applied for them to be included again. They were put back on the list, and their votes used on election day.

I have a friend whose daughter is studying at Edinburgh University. When she left home her name was struck off the electoral list. To his surprise, her father found that it had been put back. He immediately got in touch with her to find out whether she had asked for that. She said that she had not, since she intended to vote in Edinburgh. He then went to the polling station and spoke to the presiding officer, who said that he had no power to strike anyone's name off. My friend said that he would stand there and that there would be serious trouble if anyone came in and attempted to vote in his daughter's name. After almost an hour the presiding officer said that he would put a pencil through the girl's name but that this, in itself, was no guarantee that someone would not be able to come in later and use the vote. This happened on a massive scale. Individuals had access to records of people studying outside the country, and they applied to have the students' names put on the register so that others could use their votes.

A lot of illicit voting took place very early in the morning, so that many people found later that their vote had already been used. This was organized on quite a large scale in many places. Such matters must give us all cause for concern. To have democracy, you must guard the franchise.

It should be made illegal to have your name on more than one electoral list. At present a person acts illegally only if he votes in more than one place. Anyone found to have his name on two lists should be struck off one of them immediately. People should have to choose the constituency in which to be registered. The present system leaves the situation far too open. The Forum should appoint a Committee to take evidence on this matter. I do not think that the Chief Electoral Officer has the necessary machinery and ability. The exercise should be carried out in a public forum.

Some of us remember, and some who are a lot younger are happy not to remember, the old days when one had to battle for people's inclusion on the electoral list. A person sat at the box, and it was his job to challenge people on whether they had the right to vote. Because we now have means of identification, people seem to think that we no longer need such provision. But the identification system has been abused and exploited by people who do not believe in democracy in order to get a particular result.

The steps that are listed in the amendment are important for the purpose of ensuring that only people who are entitled to vote are registered. Other Members will give evidence that in their areas whole streets were omitted when forms were being given out, while the people in other streets did not have theirs collected. I know that one Forum Member had to collect names himself to prevent people from being excluded.

The tragedy is that not many people check the electoral list although they are told to do so. More and more of what we thought was being done by the Chief Electoral Officer will have to be done by agents and parties.

I also know of postmen who were intimidated into handing over large numbers of postal votes and were therefore unable to deliver them.

All these matters should be examined by a Committee of the Forum, which represents the grass roots of the Ulster people. This is the place for such an exercise. If this practice is not stopped now, the abuse will increase and may extend to other parties, and then we will find ourselves in great difficulty.

We must all pledge ourselves to protection of the franchise. We must see that the voting lists are as correct as they can be, that only those with proper identification are allowed to vote and that action is taken to make it illegal for people's names to appear on two lists. We cannot apply our minds thoroughly to these things unless we have a Committee to take evidence from those who feel aggrieved.

Mr McBride: I am very happy to support the substance of the motion and, indeed, of the amendment.

This is a very serious subject, and it is important that we examine it. It is also very important that anything we do should not be seen as all that has to be done. The situation requires a serious response from the Government. I hope that if we do set up a Committee, provision can be made to bring in the thoughts of the SDLP, as that party has very strong opinions on the subject.

Democracy is very important, and it must be taken seriously and protected. We all understand that we must take practical steps to that end, but there is cause for serious concern about our process.

Last October, I was in Albania as an international observer at the elections there. Albania has a very new democracy, which its people take seriously. They are very proud of the right to vote. It is also a very poor country. In the town of Korçë, where I was, the electricity supply failed quite often, throwing the polling station into pitch-darkness. But people muddled through. In Korçë there were no voting lists on computer discs, such as we have. The lists were handwritten. Candidates were entitled to a copy but had to write it out themselves. The polling cards were handwritten by the people who delivered them. The Albanians took their voting seriously and made a lot of effort. For all their poverty, they have a very simple rule — no photo, no vote — to which they kept consistently, in spite of technological limitations.

It is amazing that we have a system which is so open to abuse. The absurdity and the weakness were summed up in a situation encountered repeatedly during the last two elections. On one hand, there were people coming in with the photographic part of a driving licence but being turned away because they did not have the little bit of paper on which endorsements are recorded. On the other, people were coming in and throwing down a wee scrap of card, which was accepted without any query at all. That indicates the complacent, bureaucratic approach which is sometimes taken by the electoral office, whose main concern is to apply rules strictly, rather than fulfil the purpose of the exercise. The system needs to be shaken up. We need a system that requires photographic identification — for example, a passport or driving licence. We could make some alternative provision for people who do not have photographic identification. Indeed, that is important.

But this is not just about personation in polling stations. Our whole system is slack from beginning to end, and the slackness begins with the process of voter registration. There is nothing to stop anybody filling in as many names as he wants on the registration form. I have seen examples which have certainly given rise to queries. You could give virtually fictional names and then apply for postal or proxy votes. You just manufacture voters. It can be done so easily.

We have a system which is wide open to abuse. It is leading our democracy into disrepute and contempt. We really must work on that. The issue needs to be taken up seriously at Government level, and the Forum too should consider it in a positive way. That is important. There has been too much complacency. We must take our democracy very seriously and try to stamp out these abuses.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I support the DUP's amendment because it gets to the heart of the problem, and I look forward to adoption of the proposal that a Committee be formed.

This is a wide-ranging problem. While personation is the main and a very serious problem, I want to take a few minutes to deal with what I consider to be greater corruption of the political system and the electoral system in Northern Ireland.

For many years the people of the province have gone to vote. Sometimes they have had difficulty because of changes in the system and in the forms of identification required. But the one thing that is stamped over all the elections of the past 25 years is that successive British Governments have been guilty of ignoring the wishes expressed through the ballot-box by those who were able to register a vote.

10.30 am

I want Members to consider briefly what that has led to in Northern Ireland. In 1986, following the imposition of the Anglo-Irish Agreement, 418,000 people voted in by-elections that were caused when some Northern Ireland Members of Parliament resigned in protest against the Agreement. Those 418,000 people indicated that they were not prepared to accept the Agreement. They did so by voting for agreed Unionist candidates. I look back on that time with great enthusiasm, and I think of the unity of purpose that we had in opposing that document. That was followed by two rallies at the city hall, when more than half a million people came onto the streets to demonstrate their opposition to the Agreement, and later by a

petition, signed by 425,000 people, that was sent to Her Majesty the Queen. I recall these events to demonstrate that even if we introduce a perfect electoral system in Northern Ireland, even if every person who is entitled to vote does vote and if those who are not entitled do not, we are left with a great democratic deficit.

We face today a new Government who are determined to ignore the wishes of the Unionist electorate even more. In the two recent elections the majority of people in the Unionist community returned in the greatest number those who in all their election manifestos and communications expressed opposition to the Anglo-Irish Agreement, the framework document and the Downing Street declaration. The situation we face today is serious. A concerted effort is being made by church leaders, by some representatives of the business community and now by the press to misrepresent, subvert and undermine the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland, who have elected representatives to state their position categorically on the matters under consideration. That is evidenced this week by an orchestrated campaign — orchestrated, I suggest, by the Northern Ireland Office and the new Secretary of State. It is no coincidence that just this week all these people have put their various slants on why the Unionist community should lie down and take its medicine.

A perverse and very dangerous gospel is now being preached throughout the province.

Ms McWilliams: On a point of order, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: I know what you were going to say, Ms McWilliams.

Mr Wilson, you are straying rather from the purpose of this.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I will return to the point. A perverse situation now exists, with the suggestion that the Christian thing would be to give in to evil, that after 25 years of refusing to lie down and accept that terrorists should dictate the terms and conditions for parades, the people of Northern Ireland should do the Christian thing and give in.

I want to quote a verse from the Scriptures:

“Or else how can one enter into a strong man's house, and spoil his goods, except he first bind the strong man? and then he will spoil his house.”

I want to alert the people of Northern Ireland, especially those within the Unionist family, that this is exactly what is taking place in our province today. An attempt is being made by small men to bind the sleeping giant of Unionism and those within Unionism, need to awaken to that fact.

Mr McBride: On a point of order, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: I have already warned you once, Mr Wilson. You are straying. Will you please get back to the motion, which is very plain — *[Interruption]* Thank you for that comment.

I am trying to get the debate back to either the motion or the amendment.

Mr Cedric Wilson: I note that on many occasions people have spoken in debates about matters not related at all to the subject under discussion, and there has been no chorus. However, as my words are obviously effective, I do not need to prolong them. I can see from those who are howling most —

Mr Eric Smyth: Portadown sorted them out last night.

The Chairman: It is time to discuss the motion.

Mr Cedric Wilson: In winding up, may I simply say that —

Mr Eric Smyth: There are some Protestants left in Portadown.

Mr Cedric Wilson: The people who continue to ignore the majority should be aware that if the wishes of the Unionist community are to be disregarded, as in the 'Belfast Telegraph' last night, and if those opposed to the plan put forward by the Government are to be classified as extremists, they will not be helping the situation but, rather, compounding the problem.

Ms Sagar: On a point of order, Mr Chairman. We are here for a debate on a particular motion.

The Chairman: You are absolutely right. and I am very disappointed, Mr Wilson, that you are introducing matters which are obviously heralding what you propose to say in another place or in this place later. Please stick to the motion.

Mr Cedric Wilson: We are talking about abuse of the electoral system. My comments are very relevant to that.

The Chairman: I do not think they are. It is time you got to the motion and/or the amendment.

Mr Cedric Wilson: If the problem of personation is of concern to people here they should set up a Committee to deal with it. I suggest, however, that the Committee have a wider remit. It should look at all the abuse of the political system here and at the way in which the wishes of the people of Northern Ireland have been signed.

Mr Neeson: I shall look at the Record of Debates next week to see if the comments made by Mr Eric Smyth constitute incitement to hatred.

Mr Peter Robinson: Mr Chairman, somebody just stood up and started to speak. He was not called by you, and he did not indicate that he was getting up on a point of order. If the Member has a point of order to raise, he should ask you to hear it, and not simply stand up and start to talk.

The Chairman: We will, I hope, cool this a little bit now. Mr Smyth, I think I heard your stentorian tones at one stage there. Could you please curb them and cool them.

May we now please continue with the discussion on this motion and/or the amendment.

Mr Casey: I also wish to support the motion. When the concept of universal suffrage was first mooted, the political parties North and South held the view that not only the living should have a vote, but the dead too. I think it was common practice at one time to use the vote of someone who had died, if his name was still on the register. The old adage "Vote early, and vote often" was taken literally, and not just in a jocular sense. Dr Paisley referred to votes being cast early. Certainly in the old days people did vote early, and they came back later and voted again.

There is no doubt that every party was engaged in personation on a considerable scale, even in the old days, although we would all deny it now. It ill behoves any of us to deny that there was electoral malpractice. But it is doubtful that there was much advantage in trying to manipulate the system, because the actions of one side more or less cancelled out the actions of the other. I can speak from experience, having been involved in electoral courts and in the perusal of registers 40 to 50 years ago. It was also quite apparent then that some people used two addresses. I remember challenging people who did that very thing.

It was hoped that the introduction of identification would stop much of the personation. There is, however, anecdotal evidence that some parties have become experts in the once-honourable practice of personation and are organizing it on a massive scale. The dramatic increase in applications for postal and proxy votes and the use of false means of identification would suggest this. I leave Members to draw their own conclusions as to which parties are involved in personation and are using the methods that I have identified. We are all fascinated by the increase, particularly in the applications for postal votes. The Chief Electoral Officer himself has said that he is very concerned, but he never seems to do anything about it. It is time that either he or somebody who is in control of the system actually did something about what I will describe only as this alleged abuse. What we need is not wringing of hands or pointing of fingers but an attempt to devise a system which is less open to manipulation, which is more foolproof, than the one we have at present. Pension books, family allowance books and things like that are open to massive manipulation. Anybody can walk in with a book and use the vote of the person named in it, and we have evidence that medical cards too have been reproduced on a grand scale.

There is also the issue of multiple entries in the electoral register. There was evidence, confirmed by the Chief Electoral Officer, of people being registered at two, three or possibly four different addresses in the Belfast area. That may not be so easy in some rural areas, but certainly there was evidence of it in Belfast.

Some polling stations are not suitable. Thought should be given to addressing this matter. During a recent election in the Upper Bann constituency some people had to travel seven miles, passing two polling stations on the way, to get to the one where they were going to vote. There has to be something wrong with a system of that sort. The abuse of postal and proxy votes is most serious. Some cognizance must be taken of this, and something done about it. The Alliance Party Members have outlined how they witnessed abuse in others

areas. I agree that we take evidence from other sources, and I wholeheartedly support the motion.

10.45 am

Ms McWilliams: We also support the motion. It is very timely, and it is probably right that the urgency with which the matter was raised should be maintained. As the motion says, the Government should review voting procedures immediately. We would argue that there is no time like the present, and it would be best to act in the post-election period when people still have recall of the inadequacy of the current system. We are very much in favour of an independent review.

We believe that this course would benefit all. We advocate a fair and equitable system. Certain problems were raised during the elections. It probably would not benefit us to rehearse them with reference to any one party. Our view is that such a review would benefit anyone contesting a future election. There is a problem with identity checks, which is why we are calling for an independent review. This is going to be very difficult. The issue of United Kingdom identity cards has been raised elsewhere. In Northern Ireland it is a particular problem, and we shall have to debate whether we should be using such a system for electoral registration.

There might be a difficulty with photographs. I hear what Mr McBride has to say about Albania. There could be under-representation among the people going to vote — certainly in the case of the elderly, many of whom do not have passports. Indeed, many women do not carry driving licences. So the only piece of paper left is a medical card or some other document without a photograph. If we are going to insist on photographs, we will have to think the matter through because we shall have a massive exercise on our hands.

We would call for an entirely new system. The current identity checks are not perfect. There are many problems, as we saw during the recent election, but they are a step in the right direction.

I also agree that there has been a massive problem with over-registration. This is something that must be looked at seriously. But there is also a problem with under-registration. Young people should be encouraged to register, as in other countries. In the United States, registration is compulsory, and in Australia it is a civic duty to vote. I would like to see in the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, a real campaign to encourage people to carry out this civic duty. There is massive alienation of young people — they just do not care enough to vote. Sitting where we do, we certainly realize how women had to campaign for the vote. The suffragettes struggled for many years to secure that right. Young people today should be encouraged to recognize voting as a civic duty.

We need to look at systems that would take us away from multiple registration and deal with the problem of under-registration. The public should be given more information about voting systems. We went from a general election with first-past-the-post voting to a local election with proportional representation. Party-political people know what to do when they go into a polling booth, but there are many who do not understand the differences

between the various systems of voting. There should be more public information. In this way we would encourage more people to come out and vote.

I want, finally, to refer to a matter that is not mentioned in the motion. I believe that there should be an independent review of the issue of access to polling booths — a subject that has been raised in the Forum in the past. As we go into the next century it is a disgrace that there are still have people who have to be lifted out of wheelchairs and carried into polling booths. The indignity for the disabled is beyond belief. I witnessed such a case myself. It shows how seriously some people take their civic duty that they are prepared to put themselves through such indignity.

Likewise, parents experience difficulty at polling stations. It is not without the bounds of possibility to have ramps to facilitate people with children in buggies. Very small children who were sleeping could be left outside.

Mr Jim Rodgers: Is Ms McWilliams aware that polling stations in many parts of England, Scotland and Wales, unlike those in Northern Ireland, have a much wider booth for people in wheelchairs and that ramps are provided in most cases?

Ms McWilliams: That is exactly the point I am making. It is not just polling stations but also voting booths that are inaccessible. The disability movement has taken this matter on board. Monica Wilson raised it on the day of our elections.

I welcome this debate and commend those Members who have spoken so far, particularly Mr Hussey for the brevity of his speech.

Mr Foster: I rise to support the motion.

Undoubtedly, there is great concern at the irregularities in the voting system and that a true bill has not been established in respect of past elections. It has been said

*"O what a tangled web we weave,
When first we practise to deceive!"*

Deceit, circumvention and deception there was aplenty. Of that there is no doubt whatsoever. There is a Russian saying, too, for when you have to decide whom you can trust these days:

"Fear the goat from the front, the horse from the rear, the man and woman from all sides."

The present identification requirements lead to abuse of the system. They are not satisfactory. We can talk for a long time around different issues, but the real issue is that an identity card, with a photograph, for each person is essential. We cannot get away from that. There has been mass abuse of the system that accepts medical cards and other documentation. One presiding officer said to me that he had never seen so many brand new medical cards. There is also a problem with regard to social-security benefit books. Many people are very resentful at the breach of confidentiality involved in their presenting benefit books. This issue should be examined, and the practice dispensed with. It is not acceptable at all.

Registration has been mentioned. It certainly is an issue. The household form should be enlarged to include more details. As constituted at present, it encourages malpractice. I am not, convinced by the registration system at all. It is full of flaws and, indeed, encouragement, to impersonate.

In the case of students, too, there is not enough confirmation. Courses are not defined precisely enough to make for accurate registration. It is reported that in certain constituencies — I have been told about at least one — as many as 18 people were registered in a two-bedroom flat. Now, that is utterly ridiculous — amazing even. The non-return of household forms for three years should mean deletion from the electoral register. The register is not foolproof. Many names remain on it when they should not be there at all.

The continual registration system is also abused. Hearings are not as representative of the parties as those held after the issue of the draft copy of the original register. Also, is a data base for the province available to the electoral officer for checking purposes? If so, it should include proof of a previous address or the date of birth. More thorough examination of this aspect is undoubtedly necessary. Only fraud and falsehood dread examination; truth invites it. To inveterate liars, truth is stranger than fiction.

The proxy-voting system requires tightening up. Quite often, as has been said, the actual elector is unaware that such an application has been made. Often, electors turn up, only to find that their votes have been used by other, faceless persons. A letter seeking confirmation of application should be issued to the elector. A voter has often been known to act as proxy for as many as six members of one family. That does seem somewhat strange, and it begs this question: are the electors entitled to be registered at that home at all?

Abuse is the weapon of the vulgar and the unprincipled. It never troubles the wolf how many the sheep may be. There are undoubtedly plenty of figures, but the truth is buried. Nothing is politically right which is morally wrong. And there are many immoral things going on in electoral registration and in the voting system.

The abuses of the electoral system must be eradicated. A true bill is not being evidenced. Too many people are pawns for the low-down in society, who are so damnably dirty, so violently degenerate, so perfidious and, indeed, so cunning. On the other side of the coin, many people who are entitled to vote do not exercise the franchise. "Shame" I say to them. Many of them are too comfortable, too casual and, in some cases, too pompous and comparatively well-off. They think it beneath their dignity to exercise the franchise. Shame on them because they have given Sinn Fein and Republicanism council places that they should not have.

I would not deny anyone the right to vote. It is a sad reflection on those who did not vote that, because of their carelessness, subversive elements throughout Northern Ireland are attempting to convince decent people that they should be placed on the same level as constitutional citizens. It is true that virtue is an act of the will — a habit which increases the quantity, the intensity and the quality of life. It builds up, strengthens and vivifies personality. It is sad and sickening that a system of identification and the right to vote are contaminated by so many flaws that, coupled with the laziness of so many who do not vote,

they allow virtues to be smothered in Sinn Fein's thrust for supremacy in this lovely land of ours. They are like pirates spreading misery and ruin.

But right must prevail. A true bill must be an absolute requirement in an election, and investigation and photographic identification are of the essence.

Mr Peter Robinson: I rise to support the amendment in the name of the Democratic Unionist Party.

I accept the thrust of the Ulster Unionist Party's proposal — indeed, the intention of everyone who has spoken is the same — but the Democratic Unionist amendment is more specific in indicating that this is not simply a matter of dealing with the issue of personation, that other abuses of the electoral system have also to be dealt with. In addition, the amendment would provide a specific role for the Forum in respect of this very urgent matter.

Everyone knows that there has always been electoral abuse in Northern Ireland. Indeed, it is not peculiar to this province. The "Vote early, vote often" slogan was mentioned by the Labour representative. Indeed, it is often quoted with a degree of mirth. But there is nothing funny about this form of electoral abuse — stealing somebody else's vote, attempting to change the outcome of the democratic process by irregularities of one type or another, particularly on the present scale.

It is on this scale because one organization in particular is taking part in the democratic process — not because it believes in democracy at all, but because it sees abuse of the process as part of its aim of getting a united Ireland, by whatever means. Abusing the electoral system means nothing to those who are prepared to shoot or bomb. You can be sure that a military organization whose end is to win, no matter what, will use whatever resources are necessary to win at the polls, even if it means adding people who do not exist to the electoral register or claiming that a multiplicity of people are in the same house. We saw the 'Spotlight' evidence of 10 people in a blocked-up house in West Belfast. This is happening right across the province, but particularly in Belfast, and especially in Republican areas. Such abuse means nothing to those who are prepared to do much worse in order to support their cause. In a situation where tens of thousands of votes — let there be no doubt about it: tens of thousands of votes — are being stolen and tens of thousands of names that are not entitled to be there are being put on the electoral register there is a requirement for action on the part of those who believe in the democratic process. This is an organized, military campaign to steal and create votes.

11.00 am

The Democratic Unionist Party's amendment indicates that a number of issues need to be dealt with. The first of these is the removal of multiple entries from the electoral register. The main concern here is that the electoral registers are not properly checked. Reference was made to a data base. The electoral registers are data bases, and they form part of the data base that is held on computer by the electoral office. But does the programme check for multiple entries? Obviously not, or the electoral officer would have taken action before now. It is very easy to produce a programme to determine whether the same name appears in more than

one place. Why has this not happened? Why are checks not taking place? It should be a normal responsibility of the Chief Electoral Officer to carry out these checks.

I had more complaints about the inadequacy of the electoral register during last two elections than ever before. A number of people have been left off. In certain streets three and four houses were completely eliminated even though they were on the register for the Forum election. It is the responsibility of the electoral office to collect forms from all households in Northern Ireland. If there is nobody at home, the electoral officers should go back again and again. That is the responsibility of the electoral office, but it does not happen. It simply does not happen. A form is delivered to your home. Either you fill it in or you do not fill it in. If you do not fill it in, or are not there when it is called for, you are not put on the electoral register. One of the duties of the Chief Electoral Officer should be to ensure that everybody who is entitled to a vote is on the register and that those who are not entitled to a vote are not.

The amendment also indicates that provision should be made for suitable and convenient polling stations. Reference was made to the disabled. There were ugly scenes at polling stations when disabled people who came to vote, at considerable difficulty, were not able to gain access to the polling stations, either because of steps or because of blocks at the entrance that would not allow a wheelchair through. That is very embarrassing for a disabled person. When such a voter was unable to get into Elmgrove polling station in East Belfast the people inside showed no willingness to come out and allow that person to vote in the car. Polling stations must be accessible to all those who want to vote.

There is also the issue of where polling stations are located. This was mentioned by Mr Casey. I too have heard of people who, because there is no bus route from one polling station to another, had to walk past two stations and vote at a third. We must get the system down to a finer art. That is discouraging to those who want to vote.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: In North Antrim one section of a strongly Loyalist area had to vote in a school in a completely Nationalist area. When I raised the matter the headmaster of the school attacked me and said that I had run his school down. It had nothing to do with the school; it had to do with the school's being in a location adjacent to a Protestant area. It is not right to ask people who are strongly of an opinion to go into an area where they are at risk. The police told me that they could not guarantee the security of workers in that school, yet people are being asked to go there to vote. These things must be looked at. The Chief Electoral Officer should be made not only to consider them but also to take action.

Mr Peter Robinson: I had the same problem in the Short Strand. On that occasion the electoral office managed to overcome the difficulty. That should be done where possible.

On the issue of postal and proxy votes, it always amazes me how healthy the people of East Belfast are compared with those in Mid Ulster, Fermanagh and South Tyrone and, now, West Tyrone. About 300 people in East Belfast required postal votes, while the number in Mid Ulster and Fermanagh and South Tyrone was 4,000 or so. No matter how sympathetic I may be to those in Fermanagh and South Tyrone and in Mid Ulster who are in bad health, this raises some questions which need to be looked at very carefully.

Mr Ken Maginnis: I assure the Member for East Belfast that the reason for the higher instances of postal voting in areas that his Colleague Mr McCrea and I represent has to do with the fact that people go to university a considerable distance away. As well as that, people west of the Bann have not been as feather-bedded with jobs as those in East Belfast — we have to travel to work.

Mr Peter Robinson: I knew that the Member was going to make that mistake, which is why I sat down. I actually checked, and the number of people in those constituencies who applied for postal votes for medical reasons is significantly higher than in East Belfast. It is also noticeable that one doctor signs much more often than any other. It seems that there are particular doctors who put their autographs on an awful lot of the forms.

Voting personation is undoubtedly the key issue, but I voice the same note of caution as Ms McWilliams. I asked the presiding officers in polling stations in East Belfast about the use of the various types of identification documentation. About 70% of people use medical cards or benefit books. You simply cannot disallow documents that do not have a photograph unless there is an alternative that people can use, otherwise almost half of the electorate would probably be disenfranchised. It is not simply a case of disallowing identification documents without a photograph; they must be replaced. We have not been prescriptive in the amendment, but this is an issue. Clearly, we shall have to look at what form of identification can and should be used.

There are other relevant issues. People have spoken to me about the gangs that congregate outside polling stations in West Belfast, about people going into polling stations, taking details from the electoral register and then going around the houses saying “You have not been out to vote. Come and vote now.” This is information which clearly cannot be taken legally out of a polling station.

The issues are many. No doubt, during the course of today's debate we will hear some hair-raising examples of the abuse occurred in the last two elections. There is a need for a Committee to look at all these issues and to take evidence from as wide a group of people as possible. As the Alliance Party says, we should try to encourage representatives of the SDLP to give evidence on this matter. They clearly have great concerns about it. In terms of personation, it is principally their votes that are being stolen. The increase in the number of votes for Sinn Fein did not come about by way of persuasion; it did not happen because people had been won over by Sinn Fein. At each election Sinn Fein become more and more sophisticated at stealing votes. What we have is not an increase in support for Sinn Fein, but an increase in its military campaign to steal votes.

Mr Weir: I had not intended to speak in this debate.

I come from a constituency that Mr Robinson would call one of the healthiest in Northern Ireland. Perhaps the bracing sea air in Bangor has something to do with it, but we do not seem to have the same medical problems as large areas in the west of the province. And it is true to say that there is not the same level of electoral fraud in North Down as in other areas. In addition, the level of turn-out is an indication of the excellent tourist facilities in the constituency which seem to attract people, even on election day.

The Chairman: You have dealt with health and tourism in North Down. I hope that one of these days you will get to the motion.

Mr Weir: Like other Members, I shall get round to it eventually.

As most of us are aware, North Down does not have the level of electoral fraud that occurs in West Belfast or in parts of West Tyrone or Mid Ulster or in a number of other constituencies that have been named. Reference has been made to identification documents and to the fact that a large number of medical cards were forged. In North Down we suffer from the converse problem. I am sure that everybody in the Forum has stood outside polling stations or given lifts to people going to vote, only to find that some individuals do not have any of the seven identity documents. They bring the wrong thing and are turned away by the electoral officer.

Many of these people are elderly and a little confused. These are genuine people trying to exercise their democratic right, but are prevented from doing so. Yet we have heard of large numbers of people, particularly in the west of the province, who are not entitled to vote but who do so, and of people who vote more than once. I am sure that this has resonances elsewhere, but yet again the innocent are punished under this system, and the guilty go free. It is a matter that we have to address.

I appreciate the problems with a single identity document — these have been highlighted by Ms McWilliams and Mr Robinson — but this is something that we will have to look at eventually. There will have to be a single document, on the ground that, apart from anything else, it will help to eliminate some of the confusion. At the moment people are turning up with the wrong documents. If there were only one document, with a photograph, that would help to cut down much of electoral fraud, though there might well be problems at the start.

I counsel caution in one respect. We may have to think of more imaginative solutions to the problem of electoral fraud, such as putting some sort of temporary dye on the hands of everybody who has voted. That has been done in other countries. We will have to think of something, having seen the extent to which Sinn Fein, in particular, has been able to abuse the system by the mass production of medical cards. Some identity document with a photograph would be a lot more difficult to forge. We must not rule out the possibility that, at some stage in the future, Sinn Fein will also be able to produce an identity card with a photograph. We have to and provide a system that is as watertight as possible.

11.15 am

Nobody knows the extent of electoral fraud, but it is clear, as I am sure the Member opposite can confirm, that one parliamentary seat changed because of it. This happened in the case of numerous council seats too. In many cases, with our system of proportional representation, a handful of forged or fraudulent votes can make the difference between one person getting elected and another. We all know of cases where someone was elected by a margin of one, two, three or four votes. This is not just a matter of academic interest: it does actually change electoral results.

Finally, I would like to back up a point made by Dr Paisley about multiple registrations. We have got to produce a system under which people choose one address to be registered at. As I have said, this has not been a problem in North Down. However, for a number of years I was a student at Queen's and I know from personal experience that many people there were registered in South Belfast as well as in Fermanagh and South Tyrone, West Tyrone or Mid Ulster. On election day they made sure to vote in both areas, knowing well that nobody would check up. They knew they could do it without getting caught. We must have a situation where people choose one address as their permanent residence.

There is a wide range of issues, many of which, as they have been touched upon, I do not want to go over, but as this one is vital I urge people to support the Ulster Unionist motion.

Rev William McCrea: This is a very serious matter, and I come from a constituency that has experienced its full weight. If the truth were told, and if justice were done and were seen to be done, I would still be the Member of Parliament for Mid Ulster. With more and more evidence coming in, I know — and I am glad the amendment suggests that we should set up an investigation into electoral fraud and the way forward — that I had more authentic votes in Mid Ulster than Sinn Fein/IRA's mouthpiece for terrorists, Martin McGuinness. Unfortunately, the people of Mid Ulster are denied an elected representative, clearly because of electoral fraud. And the time allowed for objections to the result of an election is very limited.

Given the evidence that is now coming in, we would certainly have lodged a proper objection had we had more time. I am horrified by some of the details that are now emerging. The reality has dawned upon the whole constituency of what happened during the Westminster and council elections. The results of both were affected.

As the numbers involved in the council elections were greater, one has to ask how many councillors were elected fraudulently. Certainly the people of Mid Ulster have been robbed of an elected representative at Westminster because of deliberate fraud. I want to make it clear that what we had in Mid Ulster was not a parliamentary election but a paramilitary election. Right from the very beginning a paramilitary organization manipulated the process in a paramilitary way. Between the Forum election and the Westminster election 1,400 new names appeared on the electoral list. In fact, 180 names were added after the registration period ended.

It is interesting that some parents — especially in the Coalisland area — when they were asked why they had not known that their families were living with them in September and only found out in March, said that their benefits would have been withdrawn if the families had been included on the electoral list. I am going to take the names to the Department of Health and Social Services and demand that officers tell me whether these people were registered as being at home at that time and whether benefit was claimed. If they were not registered in September and claimed benefit on that basis from September, then from that time until the election, fraudulent claims were made.

It is about time we had a bit of honesty, decency and morality back in this country. I am not talking about disenfranchising anyone; what I am saying is that we should protect

the vote and the right to vote. I have no objection to being honourably defeated in an election — none whatsoever — even if it is hurtful (and I have known that experience in the past), but I have every objection to people deliberately destroying the democratic process and to people being denied proper representation in the House of Commons and in district councils by politicians who honourably stand by democracy. People have been deliberately robbed by those who do not recognize democracy at all. Even at this stage, the Government should look again, if they have any concern, at the Westminster results for West Belfast and Mid Ulster. They should order a proper, in-depth investigation.

The number of postal votes requested from Mid Ulster for the Forum election of a year ago was 2,676, with 443 proxies. When it came to the Westminster election the numbers were 3,606 and 1,439 — 2,000 additional votes: more than Sinn Fein's majority over me. That is what demands a proper examination. Overall, in the case of the Westminster election, there were 43,000 applications for postal votes, 16,500 of which were from west of the Bann. Many of these have been identified as fraudulent. Mr Bradley said that he was deeply concerned — I have heard him talk on numerous occasions about his deep concern — yet he has done nothing about this deliberate abuse and destruction of democracy. If Mr Bradley has no will to do the job, he should step down and allow somebody else to take up the cudgel. This is a denial of democracy.

There is also talk in my constituency that many postal-vote requests that were accepted are now under suspicion. I am told that Mr Bradley has the forms in his office at this moment. I want to ask Mr Bradley a straightforward question. What has he done? Has he taken any action? I am told that there have been recommendations. He can either deny or confirm this. I want the proof. There have been requests for prosecutions. How many cases have been recommended for prosecution? Where there are fraudulent claims, there ought to be proper prosecutions.

I am told that in my constituency up to 10% of the votes for Sinn Fein were fraudulent — the votes of people who went through the polling stations. Surely this ought to be looked at because that number would be greater than Sinn Fein's majority over me.

I know of a Roman Catholic polling officer who was so embarrassed by what he saw in his local station that when it came to the council election he requested to be moved to another station. He could not allow it to go on. He himself could not object to people coming in eight or nine times to vote, but was so embarrassed that he asked to be moved to another station. In fact, a council seat in my constituency changed hands when people came in eight times. Some officials asked questions, but they could do absolutely nothing — they knew that they were forging, that they were deliberately defrauding the system.

They had medical cards which were not their own. How did it happen? I will tell Members how it happened. People were allowed to purchase a list of those who had voted in the Forum election, and from day one, from the day it was announced that a general election had been called, Sinn Fein was in looking for the list. Then they took to task those who had not voted. They applied for postal and proxy votes, using their names, and they went to work forging medical cards. Much of the forging was done on the basis of the register which was officially presented to us. The parties were given the right to get the names of those who had voted.

After the Westminster election Sinn Fein sent a letter to those who had not voted, demanding to know why they had not come out. During our council election, we had some folk coming into the polling station, throwing the letter down on the table, demanding to know why it had been sent to them and saying that it was nobody's business that they had not voted and that it was not for Sinn Fein to demand an explanation. Fraud was clearly going on throughout the area.

And another thing is that in Coalisland all cars had to stop outside the gate of the school where the Sinn Feiners were sitting. The police have this on record. Sinn Fein activists — thugs well known in the area — were then demanding identification.

I know that my time is running out, but there are two other things that I have to say.

One post office which was open made those pension books available to various persons, who then voted in the names of the elderly people concerned — people who would not be out to vote. It is disgusting and disgraceful, but it goes deeper: it denies people, probably including those in West Belfast, proper lawful, legal, democratic representation on the Floor of the House of Commons. Something must be done — tinkering with the system is not sufficient, and it is not enough to say "Aye, we are horrified by what is happening." Action must be taken to stop such corrupt practices throughout the province.

I will certainly be supporting the amendment, which details matters that need to be looked at. I trust that the Committee will be set up and that evidence will be taken. This is something that the SDLP can come in on as they did during the education debate. They can come in and take part in a Committee investigation.

11.30 am

Mr Empey: We can all appreciate the heartfelt plea that we have just heard from Mr McCrea, who has obviously suffered as a result of this widespread fraud.

There is one issue that we ought to look at: the degree of carelessness on all our parts over the electoral register. It is something we take for granted. We assume, because it is done officially, that it is right. But we know to our cost now that that is not the case. The draft register comes out just before Christmas — the worst time of the year for any political party or for any people to give it their full attention. Why does it have to come out on 15 December, which seems to be a perfectly arbitrary date? Would it not be better to produce it at a time of the year when people were able to pay more attention to it? Just before Christmas is the time when people are least able to check it.

The other question is this: why is there such objection to photographic evidence? This is commonplace on mainland Europe. We hear that the SDLP and others are committed Europeans; they keep talking about Europe. Identity cards are commonplace there, so I see no reason for their not being introduced here.

Mr McBride made a very pertinent point about the ridiculous situation of people turning up with the part of the driving licence that is of some value but being turned away.

We know that this is one of the most common reasons for votes being refused. Very often people vote on their way to work or business, and very few of them can come back. Many take personal offence at this, and their vote is lost.

I am sure most parties have discovered that many people nowadays do not have one of the prescribed documents. Pensions and allowances are frequently paid into banks, and people do not, therefore, have a pension or allowance book. Many older folk do not have passports or driving licences, and that leaves us only with the medical card. Of course, it would not be like us if we did not have bureaucratic confusion over that. There is more than one type, and people get confused. The item that so many people rely upon is the one that is most easy to duplicate and use fraudulently.

There is evidence that the current Government are prepared to tackle this issue. The Minister for Political Development, Paul Murphy, has indicated that he is prepared to look at it. I welcome that. But what we are attempting today — and, as I say, there is no disagreement in principle here — is get down and do something about it while it is fresh in our minds. If we do not do it now, we will slide away, there will be panic stations coming up to the next election, and we will be back in the same position.

As Mr Peter Robinson said, this was, and is, a military operation. We all know that. It was done on a massive scale. But it is no use presenting anecdotal cases; we have to have facts. We have to have hard-core evidence. Research needs to be done on the registers to see how many of those who died during the period up to the poll appear to have voted. That is one matter that can actually be checked, if people take the time. As to registration we heard one Gerard Adams, when asked how it was that so many of his close associates and bag carriers and the persons who are seen at his shoulder every day of the week were all registered in a flat in the Divis Tower, reply

“Oh, I know nothing about that. Sinn Fein has no policy on these matters.”

All his henchmen were double registered. The whole thing is nonsense. Could we not use a person's national insurance number on the application form because that is something that cannot be duplicated?

Mr Gibson: Date of birth.

Mr Empey: Or date of birth.

There is a whole range of issues. If we put our minds to it we can find a way out, but the principal requirement is to shake people out of the complacency that Mr McBride mentioned. There is a bureaucratic approach to this, but not a political approach which would get the abuses stopped. It can be done, but the will has to be there. I sincerely hope that the Government, having indicated that they are prepared to look at this, will follow through because it is becoming a United Kingdom-wide problem. In certain areas across the water people are beginning to catch on to the move, so it really must be dealt with.

Mr McCrea commented on the number of people standing about outside polling stations. This has reached the stage of intimidation. People have to run the gauntlet to get in.

With so many parties fighting some elections, you can have a dozen people standing outside. We all have people at the polling stations, although I have yet to come across anybody who did not know how he was going to vote when he left the house and had to be convinced at the gates of the polling station. Nevertheless, we all do it because everybody else does it. Is it necessary to have anybody outside stations? Is it necessary to have material displayed there? Interestingly enough, in that great Valhalla in Dublin, they banned the practice. You are not allowed to display material, I think, within 50 yards or 100 yards of a station. You are not allowed to have any agents or persons standing outside a station giving out election material. Apparently those rules were introduced some time back.

The evidence is that there is intimidation. People are seen to be there, and, as Mr McCrea says, people are seen not to be there — which is the more important of the two aspects. It is not who is out; it is who is not out. This has to be looked at, and it may very well be that we should stop having anybody outside the stations so that people can go in, free from any intimidation whatsoever, and cast their votes in the secrecy of the ballot-box. Within the station, the polling booths are very small. People can see. There is no curtain. Much could be done to make things more private. Sinn Fein and others, where they have the manpower, have people inside watching.

We have to look at the process from stem to stern. What is needed is a review of the whole system. There have been some challenges — West Belfast was mentioned — but that is only the tip of the iceberg. The registration problem can be cured by using dates of birth or national insurance numbers. Mr Weir made the point about students being registered in the Belfast area and at home. I believe that with modern-day computers, if the will is there, the software is there to resolve the matter. A serious attempt must be made to tackle the problem, but it needs the political will.

If the Forum can do nothing else, it has provoked this debate, and I hope it will ensure, once and for all, that a stop is put to this abuse.

Mr Shannon: I rise to support the amendment.

The issue has been well debated so far and I will try not to go over points which have already been raised.

Many of us are concerned about the upsurge in votes for militant Republicanism in the last two elections. Both the parliamentary and council elections showed that trend. But what does the trend really show? What has come forward, quite clearly, is concern over irregularities with the votes. That is what this proposal and, indeed, the amendment are trying to address. Stories have been told to illustrate the problem here today, primarily by Mr McCrea from Mid Ulster. There have been many stories in the press as well about the hundreds of applications for postal votes, and about turnouts of almost 96% in wards where it would seem that almost everyone who lived there made an effort to go and vote. Now, that is the way it should be. People should exercise their franchise. I welcome that. But what is not acceptable is the exploitation of such elections by one element of the community. Perhaps Members will follow an illustration which has been brought to my attention of how the system can be abused and, indeed, of how it has been abused. It is quite possible that one person could register at 10 different addresses. For example, in Belfast, he or she could apply

for postal votes for six of those locations on the grounds of sickness, holiday, work, or, indeed, being a university student. The other four votes could be for different wards which, in actual fact, could mean that he or she could go to four different schools to register a vote, or, in some cases, go to the same school twice. To receive the necessary identification all one has to do is apply for a medical card from the Central Services Agency in Belfast. On the other hand, one could, as has been alleged, obtain a fake medical card. I understand that these have been used on a number of occasions and, indeed, were produced by the hundred.

This is one example of how one person could vote, perhaps 10-plus times and take advantage of the inadequacies in the electoral system. At present an officer goes round the houses collecting the forms. As often happens, some members of the household are working or away. Therefore, the officer quite simply takes the word of the person who happens to be there about how many people are in the house. Imagine going round the houses in West Belfast asking people there to confirm the details of everyone in each house. It is a task that would probably take a detachment of soldiers or policemen.

The Chief Electoral Officer has declared that something is amiss with the electoral system but has failed to put forward any suggestions for improving it. There are a number of proposals in the DUP amendment which, I believe, could alleviate the situation. Perhaps the time has come to issue an identity card to each person who has a valid right to vote, with a photograph which would further identify the person concerned. We also need a system in areas of Belfast and elsewhere where the presiding officers at polling stations are neither intimidated nor subjected to intimidation and can carry out their duties without fear, with the police checking the identification of people who come to vote. It will not be long before others learn how to work the system to their advantage, and they could show an increased vote as well. That is something that we must all take note of. This is an important issue because it shows that it is possible for parties to show an increase in votes which is not a true reflection of their support on the ground.

Let us investigate a system of checks that could be carried out in each household. Perhaps what is needed is a computer system that could check residency against a medical card, DHSS history, driving licence, marriage certificate, birth certificate — a cross-computer check — in order to establish each person's identity. This would be time-consuming, but it would show accurately whether a person existed at a given address or at a number of addresses.

While an identity card would be a step in the right direction, it could easily be copied by unscrupulous people, thus enabling such people to obtain votes by fraud. It may also be possible to have a card similar to the £5 note, which has a metal strip. That would be one way of making sure that those cards could not be copied. I do not know if it is possible. It may be something that could be looked at.

While we criticize, and rightly so, a system so full of holes that it is about to sink, we must look at alternatives which would make impersonation a thing of the past. We need a system now so that those who abuse — and will continue to abuse — the system can be stopped.

I support the amendment.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: I support the amendment in the name of my party.

This is a most appropriate debate. Most Members who have spoken have told us about some of their very real fears and frustrations about the way in which the electoral system is abused by many people across this country. Mr Foster used a number of clichés. One that he left out is "Cheaters never win." Unfortunately, in Northern Ireland cheaters are winning. We have heard some of the horror stories, especially from Mid Ulster and other areas, where cheaters are winning by abusing the system.

11.45 am

When Mr Hussey briefly introduced his motion, he did not, unfortunately, take time to develop his argument fully. It is here that we see the very distinct difference between the motion and the amendment in my party's name. Mr Hussey's motion proposes that the Forum call on the Government to instigate an immediate review of voting procedures for all future elections. Although I agree with the sentiments of the motion — perhaps all of us do — the mechanism proposed to deal with the problem is flawed. The Government are not going to do anything about this. We have to face that reality. We can shout into the abyss as loud and for as long as we please, but the British Government are going to ignore any plea from us. It is therefore incumbent on the Forum to make the most compelling argument possible to force the Government's hand. That is the distinct difference between the motion and the amendment. The amendment proposes a mechanism which we feel will force the Government to do something which they ought to have done pro-actively without having to be encouraged.

The erosion of the vote before our very eyes — that corrosive process which affects the democratic process — is very frustrating, and we have demonstrated today the cross-party concern at this development. It would be of some merit to look briefly at the six points in the amendment.

There is the demand that multiple entries be removed from the electoral register. It is not a crime to have multiple entries, but that has to be considered. I would be quite happy to see the stiffest possible sentences for people found guilty of electoral fraud. Often they double and triple register themselves. That is wrong, and it must be dealt with by a very stiff penalty — perhaps a substantial fine or even a short gaol sentence. These matters ought to be considered. If ever there was a compelling argument for a national identity card with a photograph, we have heard it today. An ID card would assist not only with elections but with matters such as state benefits and driver licensing. It is absolutely essential that we look now for a national identity card.

In the United States of America there is a mechanism called Motor Voter. When you go to register for your driving licence or to tax your car, or whatever, you are obliged to indicate on the official form whether or not you have registered to vote. The American Government, at one agency, are able not only to process the details of your driving licence and your car tax, but also to register you to vote if you have not registered previously. There is some merit in replicating this mechanism not only at the vehicle licensing office but at all official offices whether it be at the post office when you go in to buy stamps or collect your

pension, whether it be at the bank when you go in to cash a cheque, or whether it be at the benefits office when you go in to deal with the people there. Thus there would be a registration system at these places where people would be compelled to register for voting. The failure of the electoral office to be pro-active on this is failing the democratic process and us all.

Providing suitable and convenient polling stations is another matter of concern, especially in rural areas where some people, living in remote parts of the countryside, have a great distance to travel. In those areas which are deeply divided because of the sectarian issue it is very appropriate that the electoral office look at where the polling stations are sited. If it means that there are too many polling stations, so be it. But we must get over the problems we face in some places where people say they will not go to a particular polling station. That has to be avoided and we need to put in place a system which will look at the number of polling stations.

There is also the problem of the abuse of the proxy vote, but many people have dealt with that so I will not actually waste time on it. It is important that we find out who is involved in personation and take steps to prevent it. If either the Ulster Democratic Unionist Party or the Ulster Unionist Party were deliberately abusing the system by personation to the extent that Sinn Fein/IRA have done, there would be a cry to heaven across this country. In fact, you would hear it in Washington, you would hear it in London, and you would hear it in Dublin: the Unionists are cheaters; the Unionists are destroying and abusing the electoral system. When Sinn Fein/IRA deliberately engage in this process, however — and there is much proof of their deliberate electoral fraud — there is very little noise about it. People are not naming or mentioning them, so we have to name them. We have to say that if Sinn Fein/IRA are getting away with it, they must be dealt with ruthlessly and effectively.

Our motion also calls for a Committee to be established and empowered to appoint experts and take evidence. It would be most appropriate for Pat Bradley to give evidence to that Committee. He has indicated his willingness to speak out on the issue. Mr McBride said that it was important to devise some way for the SDLP's viewpoint to be considered. I want to hear the viewpoint of the SDLP on this issue, but their Members should come and tell us. Here is a very good opportunity for them to use the Forum for the benefit of the entire community and to make sure that democracy is not denigrated, but, rather elevated. They should come here and give their evidence.

We have also asked that the Committee consider other relevant issues that would give us the opportunity to look at the whole voting system and have a thorough examination of it. Why not look at the issue of compulsory voting in Brussels, where if you fail to vote you are fined the equivalent of about £25. In New Zealand it is compulsory to vote. There is no reason for not having such a system here. That would not stop someone going in and spoiling his vote, but it would mean that no one had an excuse for saying that democracy does not work. We should take the opportunity to examine all these matters and not only put forward appropriate suggestions to the Government but make sure that they pick up the report and run with it.

Mr Eric Smyth: I rise to support the amendment.

We all know that when people, especially senior citizens, go to vote with a medical card, a pension book or a family allowance book the people who look at them do not look at the date of birth. This issue needs to be addressed. I know of one gentleman in Glencairn whose pension book was taken from him and used by someone else to vote. The person who used it was not a pensioner, but he was not challenged because nobody checked the date of birth. That is one way of getting away with fraud.

It is important that we have this Committee because, as Mr Paisley has said, the Government will do nothing about the matter. They may talk about it, they may shout a little about it, but it is up to us as political parties to lobby for action because others may join Sinn Fein's bandwagon and try to use the same techniques. Many members of Belfast City Council were elected through fraud. If the Government and the electoral office will not look into this, we should do what Sinn Fein does: get legal aid for a senior citizen who is on benefits to take the matter through the courts. There are MPs and councillors who have been guilty of fraud and should not be in their seats. There are also those who have lost their seats because of abuse of the electoral system, and if what the electoral office tells us is true, and there was massive fraud in the two Sinn Fein constituencies, they could also take action through the courts. These MPs and councillors should be challenged if there is definite evidence of fraud.

I support the proposal for photographs on identity cards which other countries have. A photograph must show the person going to vote. The numbers on medical cards should also be checked to ensure that the cards are being shown by the right people. There are many ideas that we can consider.

We also need to look at polling stations. Some of these places are old, and some of them have steps up to the front door which senior citizens may find impossible to manage. There are many buildings today that cater for the disabled and for others who are not as fit as I am now. Of course, there will come a day when I have to use a walking stick. I have never missed a vote yet, and I hope I never will until the Lord takes me home. We need to look at polling stations to ensure that senior citizens and the disabled are able to get into them.

I hope we will all agree that we want this Committee. We have already proved that the different Committees of the Forum can work together. They have brought out good reports. I have heard many people saying how surprised they have been at our reports and really praising the Forum. At first they thought it was a waste of time, but now they see how we can use the Forum to get our points across and show that we, as politicians, have an interest in our country, in the rights of our people and in the bread-and-butter issues that we fight for.

We can do the job and bring a report forward, and the Government and the electoral office will not be able to refuse to look at it. If allegations of electoral fraud are proven, prosecutions should follow and some election results overturned. Then by-elections may be held, and constituents given the opportunity to vote for those they wish to represent them.

Mr Morrow: I understand that at the end of this debate a composite motion will be put forward. I look forward to supporting it, as does my party.

At the last two elections there was serious malpractice — vote rigging and vote stealing — on a massive scale. It is time the authorities treated this matter with a degree of sincerity. We hear so often before each election that Mr Bradley in particular is concerned about what is happening. There may be vote rigging, but when you ask him what he did the last time, he quickly replies that it is not his responsibility but someone else's. We thus have a situation where those who run the elections tell us it is not their responsibility to stop malpractice, and to date the Government have not taken the matter seriously. I do not want to prejudge what the new Government will do, but I am reliably informed that they are going to take the matter seriously. I welcome that, and I look forward to action.

12.00

May I bring to the attention of the Forum one or two incidents that happened in my area, particularly during the last two elections. Coalisland polling station has already been mentioned. A friend of mine went there to vote, and as she made her way in, with two children under seven years of age, Sinn Fein demanded that she identify herself to them. I asked her "Did you do that?", and she said "I had no alternative." That, to me, is intimidation of the highest order. Are we now getting to the situation where people cannot come and go from a polling station without being stopped outside by a crowd of henchmen, gangsters, thugs and hoods who intimidate people and do not allow them free access? Someone said "How do you know a Sinn Fein councillor?" The answer is very simple: he is normally wearing a dark suit and carrying a portable telephone. And neither of those is by accident — in particular, the portable telephone.

What was happening in Dungannon on polling day? On polling day in Dungannon Sinn Fein agents changed on a hourly basis and took with them the names of those who had not voted. They then went to the henchmen with their portable telephones, and they did the rest. Normally, that meant providing the necessary document to allow some thug to go in and vote. Someone said — and he is quite right — that there are people sitting in council chambers today who should not be there. They are not there by fair means; they are there because of a system that they have rigged and abused.

Mr McBride, in his contribution, said that he was an observer in Albania recently. We have fraud, deception, deceit, anarchy and electoral terrorism on our very doorstep. We need observers here to ensure that there is a degree of fairness. This intimidation must be stopped. How much longer can we tolerate a situation —

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: It is interesting that people who came from the South of Ireland to see that in our elections there was fair play for Republicans were well satisfied that Republicans are doing very well up here. There was no report from that body of people.

Mr Morrow: On the morning of polling day the Clerk of Dungannon District Council, who was organizing the local-government election, had to phone people at 5 o'clock, 6 o'clock and 7 o'clock to ask them to go to polling stations. Why? The appointed presiding officers had withdrawn because they did not feel that it was safe for them to go there. That actually happened. Polling stations were on the verge of opening with no presiding officers because they felt they that they could not go and return home in safety.

We have a serious situation, and I am glad that the Forum has seen fit to discuss it. I congratulate Mr Hussey on placing his motion before us because it has put the matter on to the table, and everybody will have an opportunity to say what concerns him. Concerns about this matter run right round the province.

I listened with interest to Mr Weir when he said that in Bangor they do not seem to have a medical problem. But that does not seem to get them out to vote. I do not know what is keeping them in. Mr Weir said referred to the sea air. Maybe that is what keeps them in. Perhaps Mr Weir will take note of that.

On a more serious note, I ask the Forum to support the composite motion which will be tabled very shortly because it is an honest attempt to get to the kernel of this problem — and it is a real problem. People are being intimidated, and they are not voting. Someone said that we should make it compulsory for people to vote. I have a problem with that, but that is a personal thing. I believe that that too is part of democracy — that you do not have to vote if you do not want to. But there are many people who want to vote but do not now feel that they can. I mentioned earlier the person who went to Coalisland to cast her vote in the Westminster election and was intimidated as she went into the polling station. She did not feel comfortable about going back to vote in the local government election, so she stayed at home. That is very serious, and it is but one instance.

Someone said that there should be suitable polling stations. Is it reasonable to ask someone of Unionist persuasion to work all day in a polling station located in an area which is 95% to 98% militant Republican? I am thinking of places like Galbally, which Mr Maginnis knows very well. That is the sort of situation that has to be looked at. Polling stations should be more suitable, more conducive, more user-friendly. That is very important.

I look forward to supporting the composite motion.

Mr Neeson: I want to intervene briefly. All the malpractices have been outlined by others, and they are obviously of concern to all Members. That is why I believe that some urgency should be brought into the situation. I had a meeting with Paul Murphy, the political-development Minister, and he gave an indication that the Government would look seriously at the problems that arose during the past two elections.

I should also like the Government to look at a uniform electoral system because I firmly believe that having first-past-the-post and proportional representation at different elections causes confusion. My belief is that the fairest system is to have proportional representation at all elections, including those for Westminster. I hope that the Government will give this serious consideration — and not just from a Northern Ireland perspective. The Liberal Democrats and the Labour Party indicated before the general election that this was one of the issues they would look at for the whole United Kingdom.

I would like to see total agreement on this very serious problem. I have some difficulty with the composite motion in that responsibility for dealing with this is to be referred to the Political Affairs Committee. While the Forum has agreed, in principle, to the establishment of such a Committee — and my party, as Members know, voted against it — I

believe that this issue needs to be referred to the Business Committee, which should decide on the establishment of a Committee to deal with it.

We have heard about the difficulties with staffing resources. This is something that the Business Committee should look at. I ask Mr Maginnis, when he is winding up and putting forward the composite motion, to take into consideration the concerns that other Members and I have about referring the matter to a Committee that does not yet exist.

Mr Calvert: I rise to support the DUP amendment. I have enjoyed this morning's debate. It has certainly highlighted many things which have been on people's minds during the past two elections.

I want to mention two things. One is in relation to polling cards which are sent out by the electoral office. In my area, more than 2,000 polling cards went missing. When I contacted Mr Bradley he said that all the cards had been sent out, but he did agree that something must have happened, that the fault lay with the Post Office and that there would be an investigation. I told him that he had better get on television and radio and tell people that they did not need polling cards to vote. And he did. That was very important. I was inundated with calls from people who had not received their polling cards and wanted to know if they could vote. Many of them said that they would not vote because they had not received cards. An investigation is needed to find out why the Post Office did not deliver those cards — in my area, covering Maghaberry, Moira, Aghalee, Ballinderry and other places.

Also, all the personal literature of one of the candidates in my area went missing. It was not delivered to the people who would have voted for that person or his party. An investigation into that also needs to be carried out. I understand that the literature ended up somewhere in Scotland. There is something wrong when that happens.

Mr Shannon: Maybe they are trying to tell him something.

Mr Cecil Calvert: Well, I am not going to mention the party, but they are not here today. No matter who it is, no matter what Member or what party — minus Sinn Fein — when democratic parties get their workers to write out personal literature and address it to people, it is only right that it should be delivered to those people. I have been assured that an investigation is under way, but I would like to see the outcome.

There is no doubt that in the past two elections there was a lot of personation. Proxy votes were up, as were postal votes, and identification was definitely subject to fraud. It is not asking too much of anyone to have a photograph on his identification document so that he can go along and say "This is a photograph of me; I am here to vote." Anybody who does not adhere to that, who is defrauding and trying to get into either Westminster or a council, should be ashamed of himself. Such a person is not fit to be elected anywhere.

I have enjoyed the debate. I hope that a Committee will be formed to look into this whole matter. Let us get to the bottom of it and have a situation in which everyone can feel free to vote for the party of his choice.

Mr Ken Maginnis: No one here will doubt the problems that are created by electoral fraud. They have been well rehearsed today, and it is not my intention to add anything, except, perhaps, to quantify Mr Morrow's point about Galbally, which used to be in my constituency. I shall give an example of the extent to which fraud occurs. I remember, a few years ago, going up to Galbally as I did my rounds. I arrived to hear the story of the local parish priest, who had arrived at about 11 o'clock in the morning to cast his vote. The local schoolmaster was the presiding officer. When the priest asked for his voting paper a very embarrassed principal teacher looked at him and said "I am sorry, Sir, but you have already voted." The priest said "But you know me; I have not already voted." And the teacher said "I know that, Sir, but there was nothing that I could do." That is a true story; names will not be supplied, but could be.

The problems that we have raised today, and which have been expanded upon in the Democratic Unionist Party amendment, need to be dealt with urgently. We are fortunate that we may not have — I do not say that we will not have — another election in Northern Ireland for about two years. That gives us time to go to the Government and impress upon them that they must carry out their responsibility and ensure that fair elections can take place and that we do not slide further down this slippery slope to anarchy. Abuse of the electoral system will automatically lead to anarchy.

Rather than recount our experiences as individuals we need to define and quantify the exact nature of the problem. That means that we have got to hear from those who are the voters, from the votes of others, and from the administrators.

12.15 pm

It is important that the Forum undertake that task, pursue it with the Government — I am thinking not of the medium or long term but of the comparative short term — and insist that they rectify those irregularities and malpractices that occur. I do not know whether you would like me to read the composite motion, Mr Chairman, but it might be helpful if I did.

The Chairman: Yes, I would like that .

Mr Ken Maginnis: Then I shall address very briefly a point that was quite rightly raised by Mr Neeson.

The composite motion reads as follows:

Given the concerns expressed by a wide spectrum of political, public and business opinion throughout Northern Ireland and the possibility of "irregularities" having occurred in the recent parliamentary and local-government elections, this Forum calls on the Government to instigate an early review of voting procedures for all future elections in Northern Ireland and resolves to refer this matter to the Political Affairs Committee which shall prepare a report to recommend methods of countering electoral irregularities — in particular,

- (i) removing multiple entries from the electoral register,
- (ii) ensuring that those who are entitled to vote are registered,
- (iii) providing suitable and convenient polling stations,

- (iv) overcoming postal and proxy vote abuse,
- (v) preventing voting personation by introducing proper and effective identity checks,
- (vi) considering other relevant issues —

and that the Political Affairs Committee shall report to the Forum with a view to submitting such evidence to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for consideration within the Government's review procedure.

I want to allude very briefly to what I have called the Political Affairs Committee. I have used this term for the simple reason that when the Forum assembled first, it was very easy for us to create Committees that paralleled Government Departments. We then discovered that there was going to be such an amount of work that the staff attached to the Forum would be unable to deal with it. There were various views on how to deal with those purely political issues which did not fall specifically within the ambit of one Department or another. Some of us said that we should have a Political Affairs Committee, but others were suspicious of the motives. I hope we have set their minds at rest on that matter. Here is a question that has nothing to do with the prejudices or paranoia of Unionists — it crosses the political spectrum and affects every constitutional party in Northern Ireland.

I will get back to my reason for alluding to the Political Affairs Committee. As Mr Neeson has said, that has been agreed in principle, and it is only been the setting up of the Committee that has been put on the back-burner. We did not want a proliferation of Committees. It was agreed, indeed, that departmental Committees should no longer bear names like Agriculture or Education but should be referred to as Standing Committee A, B, C, D and E. All I am doing here is emphasizing the urgent need to create space within the Committee structure so that these matters can be considered, and considered quickly.

Now, I know that Mr Neeson has no particular problem with that, and I have had an indication from the other parties in the Chamber that they have no particular problem with the subject-matter. However, the Business Committee will have a problem next Thursday which will have to be resolved: how do we fit in an urgent matter that has not got a purely departmental aspect to our —

Ms McWilliams: Would the Member give way?

Mr Ken Maginnis: Yes. I would be happy to.

Ms McWilliams: You said quite rightly that you had circulated your composite motion to the other parties, but we have not been consulted on our position. Since Mr Neeson raised the point that the Political Affairs Committee is not currently established, we think that this motion could not be taken. It could not sit easily with the Forum as it currently stands because no such Committee is in place. Therefore, such a composite motion would have to be referred to the Business Committee for it to be taken forward.

Mr Ken Maginnis: I hope I have pre-empted Ms McWilliams on that particular point. I have indicated that we are doing two things here today, we are dealing with a specific issue, and we are setting ourselves the challenge of how we deal with it. The Political Affairs

Committee which was initially alluded to may well be known as Standing Committee A or B or C — that does not matter. What does matter is that the Forum, through the Business Committee, creates the facility for dealing with purely political, non-departmental issues expeditiously.

Mr Neeson has said that his party voted against the concept of a Political Affairs Committee; I hope, to some extent, that I have reassured him, but, that apart, I know that he is a democrat and that he will in fact —

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: To have this composite motion in order, it should refer the matter to a Committee of the Forum and then it can go to whichever Committee the Business Committee recommends. There is a technical point being made here by Ms McWilliams which is that, you cannot refer something to a Political Affairs Committee that does not exist. So, to keep this right we should refer the matter to “a Committee of the Forum” that leaves it open for the Business Committee to decide where it goes.

I take it that the Political Affairs Committee that was envisaged in the debate that we had would be a suitable Committee for such an important and urgent matter. However, to keep this in order we must just say “a Committee of the Forum”.

Mr Ken Maginnis: I listen carefully but I do not want us to be tied down by technical arguments. In principle, the Political Affairs Committee has been approved; how we initiate it is what has to be addressed on Thursday. I am not going to quarrel either with Ms McWilliams or with Dr Paisley about that. It is the urgency of the situation that I want to exercise our minds.

Mr Neeson: Mr Maginnis, will you give way?

Mr Ken Maginnis: I will with the permission of the Chair, because I fear I may be running over my time.

The Chairman: You are all right for a minute or two.

Mr Neeson: If Dr Paisley was putting that proposition forward I would gladly second it. That could get the unanimous support of all the Members. This is really such an important matter that that is what we ought to do.

Mr Ken Maginnis: Let me say yet again, that neither my party nor I has a problem with that, so long as Forum Members are clear about the need to make space so that political and non-departmental issues can be discussed when they arise. That is an important duty of the Forum; that is not a concession to me or to anyone else. It is an important duty of the Forum to deal with difficult political matters in an equitable fashion when they arise. Mr Neeson surely cannot disagree with that, or Ms McWilliams or Dr Paisley. We are agreed and however you consider we should move this forward, I am content that the principle is being established. I am grateful.

The Chairman: Is not the simplest thing to delete the words “the Political Affairs” and for those three words substitute ‘A’. Does that satisfy everybody?

Mr Cedric Wilson: I am happy enough; I suggested to some of the other Members earlier that that would be a possible way to resolve it. But may I just seek clarification? Both Dr Paisley and Mr Neeson said that this should be referred to the Business Committee and it should decide which Committee the matter should be sent to. Am I right in thinking that what the Business Committee would really be being empowered to do is to come back to the Forum with a recommendation? I do not think that the Business Committee has the final authority on this. This is a matter for the entire Forum. In previous cases the Business Committee has simply come back and suggested that a matter be dealt with by Committee A, B, C or D. Alternatively, a separate Committee could be set up to deal with this because there is a wider debate here. The Political Affairs Committee which Mr Maginnis envisages may have to be a slightly different body from any of the existing Committees.

The Chairman: Time is getting on.

Rev Dr Ian Paisley: Further to that contribution from Mr Wilson and so that there be have no misunderstanding, I understand that in our Rules it is the Business Committee that makes recommendations on the setting up of other Committees. That is right and that is why I mentioned the Business Committee. I did not mention it to say that it had overall authority; I mentioned it because that is the Rule. What I am saying is that if we just have this matter referred to "a Committee", the Business Committee make its proposals about that. But I did say when I first interrupted Mr Maginnis's speech, that you need a Committee of this sort which is outside the usual ambit of other Committees that deal with the various Departments of Government. You need that Committee, and we have fully debated that — the Forum has already decided that there should be a Political Committee.

Mr Cedric Wilson: Mr Chairman, I wonder if I could just —

The Chairman: We could go on, I think.

Mr Cedric Wilson: Mr Chairman, I will be very brief. I just want to propose that the Ulster Unionist Party accept a composite motion which would take the form of Item three on our Order Paper together with the word "furthermore" and followed by the DUP amendment to the motion — they can then be combined. The wording of the DUP amendment is better in many ways. A composite motion would give us a better slant on it. We would simply take the motion moved by the Ulster Unionists, add the word 'furthermore', and then continue with the wording of the DUP's amendment, which is better structured, rather than simply going back and amending Mr Maginnis's motion.

12.30 pm

The Chairman: Mr Wilson, you have to remember that we already have a composite motion from the two largest parties here. The suggestion has been made that two words should be changed and that the matter should then go to the Business Committee. Now, is that not agreeable to everybody?

Members indicated assent.

stick to the Rules that have been laid down, I do not think that we want to get ourselves involved in a toing and froing *ad infinitum* from the Business Committee to the Forum and back. What we are about to do is agree this composite motion in principle. We will then refer it to the Business Committee with the sole purpose of letting it decide to which Committee it should be referred. There will be no need then for the matter to be referred back to the Forum.

The Chairman: That is very good.

Motion and amendment, by leave, withdrawn.

The Chairman: The composite motion on which the Forum is about to take a decision is that read out by Mr Maginnis, with the amendments that have been agreed.

Resolved:

Given the concerns expressed by a wide spectrum of political, public and business opinion throughout Northern Ireland and the possibility of "irregularities" having occurred in the recent parliamentary and local-government elections, this Forum calls on the Government to instigate an early review of voting procedures for all future elections in Northern Ireland and resolves to refer this matter to a Committee which shall prepare a report to recommend methods of countering electoral irregularities — in particular,

- (i) removing multiple entries from the electoral register,
- (ii) ensuring that those who are entitled to vote are registered,
- (iii) providing suitable and convenient polling stations,
- (iv) overcoming postal and proxy vote abuse,
- (v) preventing voting personation by introducing proper and effective identity checks,
- (vi) considering other relevant issues —

and that a Committee shall report to the Forum with a view to submitting such evidence to the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland for consideration within the Government's review procedure.

The meeting was suspended at 12.33 pm and resumed at 2.02 pm.

MEMBERSHIP OF COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Ulster Unionist Party - Mr K Maginnis MP
Mr R Coulter
Mr S Gardiner
Mr R Stoker

Democratic Unionist Party - Mr P Robinson MP
Mr N Dodds
Rev W McCrea
Mr I Paisley

Alliance Party - Mr S Neeson
*Mr D Ford

Ulster Democratic Party - *Mr F McCoubrey

UK Unionist Party - *#Mr J Dudgeon

Labour - Mr H Casey

NI Women's Coalition - Ms P Sagar

Progressive Unionist Party - *Ms D Purvis

* attend the Committee on behalf of the party under Rule 14(4)(a) of the Forum Rules of Procedure.

party resigned from Forum on 16 September 1997.

APPENDIX C

**GROUPS AND ORGANISATIONS INVITED TO MAKE
SUBMISSIONS TO THE COMMITTEE**

ORGANISATION	DATE SUBMISSION RECEIVED BY COMMITTEE
Mr Pat Bradley (Chief Electoral Officer)	
Electoral Reform Society	
Westminster Foundation for Democracy Foreign and Commonwealth Office	
SOLACE	
Disability Action	10.07.97 (Oral)
Age Concern	
Home Office	Working Groups Report received
Association of Electoral Administrators	02.10.97 (Oral)
Mr Harry Barnes MP	24.07.97 (Oral)
Royal Mail	29.09.97 (Written)
Politics Department QUB	
RNID (NI)	
RNIB (NI) Service Bureau	
SENSE Resource	
MENCAP	10.10.97 (Written)
SDLP Headquarters	
Mr J Hume (SDLP)	
Dr J Hendron (SDLP)	
Cllr A Attwood (SDLP)	
Central Services Agency	19.09.97 (Written)

APPENDIX C (Cont'd)

ORGANISATION	DATE SUBMISSION RECEIVED BY COMMITTEE
British Embassy Albania	13.10.97
British High Commission Australia	08.10.97
British Embassy Austria	01.10.97
British Embassy Belgium	
British Embassy Brazil	08.10.97
British High Commission Canada	09.10.97
British Embassy Finland	07.10.97
British Embassy France	06.10.97
British Embassy Germany	30.09.97
British Embassy Irish Republic	
British Embassy Italy	07.10.97
British Embassy Netherlands	15.10.97
British High Commission New Zealand	07.10.97
British Embassy Norway	07.10.97
British Embassy Portugal	10.10.97
British Embassy United States	

DATE IN MONITORING RECEIVED BY COMMITTEE	ORGANIZATION
11/19/97	British Embassy Atlanta
08/19/97	British High Commission Australia
01/28/97	British Embassy Austria
	British Embassy Belgium
02/17/97	British Embassy Brazil
02/19/97	British High Commission Canada
01/16/97	British Embassy Finland
02/19/97	British Embassy France
12/09/91	British Embassy Germany
	British Embassy Irish Republic
07/19/97	British Embassy Italy
12/19/97	British Embassy Netherlands
02/19/97	British High Commission New Zealand
07/20/97	British Embassy Norway
12/19/97	British Embassy Portugal
	British Embassy United States

APPENDIX D

**HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION FORM AND
REGISTRATION FORM FOR
INSTITUTIONS, HOSPITALS ETC**

APPENDIX D

HOUSEHOLD REGISTRATION FORM AND
REGISTRATION FORM FOR
INSTITUTIONS, HOSPITALS ETC

TO THE OCCUPIER – PLEASE COMPLETE THIS FORM NOW AND HAVE IT READY FOR COLLECTION
You are required by law to complete this form under Representation of the People Acts and Elected Authorities (Northern Ireland) Act 1989.
WARNING: It is an offence not to supply all the required information or to supply false information.

THIS FORM IS ONLY FOR THE USE OF • BRITISH CITIZENS • OTHER COMMONWEALTH CITIZENS
• CITIZENS OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRELAND • OTHER EUROPEAN UNION CITIZENS

European Union Citizens, other than British and Irish, are only eligible, by the use of this form, for registration as local government electors – separate, and individual, application is required for registration as European Parliamentary Electors.
Special forms are required for European Union Citizens other than British and Irish to register as European Parliamentary Electors.
Where applicable enter appropriate number required in section 7 overleaf.

**REMEMBER – ONLY THOSE WHOSE NAMES ARE IN THE REGISTER OF ELECTORS ARE ENTITLED TO VOTE
PLEASE READ THE NOTES BEFORE COMPLETING THE FORM**

Please help in the collection of the forms by completing it NOW unless you are likely to change your address before 15 September (the Qualifying Date for the NEW Register). If you intend to move house after 15 September you should still give the information requested NOW.

Notes

1. Enter all British citizens, other Commonwealth citizens, citizens of the Republic of Ireland and other European Union citizens who are 16½ years of age or over and RESIDENT IN YOUR HOUSEHOLD on 15 September 1996. From the information supplied the Deputy Electoral Officer will determine those eligible for registration.
2. **PLEASE INCLUDE:**
 - (a) all 17 year olds and those 16 year olds who will be 18 on or before 15 February 1998;
 - (b) those who normally live at your address but are temporarily away e.g. university students, short term patients in hospital, persons on holiday, etc. (Persons working away from their former home but paying the occasional visit back should NOT be shown. If you are in any doubt indicate the full details against the name(s) of the person(s) concerned or enclose a separate note.)
3. **DON'T INCLUDE:**
 - (a) Any persons who are NOT British citizens, other Commonwealth citizens, citizens of the Republic of Ireland or other European Union citizens.
 - (b) People who will NOT be 18 on or before 15 February 1998.
 - * (c) Full time members of HM Forces (other than Home Battalion Members of the Royal Irish Regiment).
 - * (d) Crown servants and British Council staff serving abroad.
 - * (e) Spouses of full time members of HM Forces (other than RIR Home Battalions) who have made a service declaration which they have not cancelled.
 - * (f) Spouses of Crown servants and British Council staff serving abroad if living abroad to be with their husbands or wives.
 - (g) Convicted persons detained on 15 September 1996.
* Special arrangements are made for these people.

This form will be collected by a duly accredited member of my staff who will produce his/her authorisation on request.

If you are not available when my staff first call a card will be left, return visits will be made, where necessary, and usually at a different time of the day or evening.

All the information requested is necessary for the compilation of an accurate register. Staff have been instructed to check the information at the doorstep so that queries may be resolved there and then without the need for further contact or correspondence. This will only take a minute or two of your time and I therefore ask for your co-operation. Thank you.

P.A. Bradley
Chief Electoral Officer

REMINDER

THE LAW PREVENTS YOU BEING GIVEN A BALLOT PAPER AT THE POLLING STATION UNLESS YOU PRODUCE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING DOCUMENTS:-

- (a) a CURRENT Northern Ireland or Great Britain full driving licence or a Northern Ireland provisional licence (in each case both parts of the licence have to be produced);
- (b) a CURRENT United Kingdom or Republic of Ireland passport (including a U.K. Visitor's passport) or other CURRENT European Union State passport;
- (c) a CURRENT book for the payment of allowances, benefits or pensions issued by the Department of Health and Social Services for Northern Ireland;
- (d) a medical card issued by the Northern Ireland Central Services Agency (NO OTHER MEDICAL CARD IS ACCEPTABLE);
- (e) a CURRENT British seaman's card;
- (f) a card made of plastic issued by the Department of Health and Social Security or the Department of Social Security with a name and national insurance number embossed on it;
- (g) in the case only of a woman married within 2 years of polling day, a certified copy or extract of an entry of marriage issued by a Registrar General in the U.K.

PLEASE CHECK NOW THAT YOU HAVE ONE SUCH CURRENT AND VALID DOCUMENT. IF YOU DELAY UNTIL AN ELECTION IS ANNOUNCED IT MAY BE TOO LATE TO OBTAIN ONE.

APPENDIX E

APPLICATION FORMS FOR ABSENT VOTING

APPENDIX

APPLICATION FORMS FOR ASSESSMENT

**APPLICATION TO VOTE BY POST OR PROXY FOR AN INDEFINITE PERIOD
BY REASON OF OCCUPATION, SERVICE OR EMPLOYMENT**

WARD No. _____
ELECTORAL No. _____

Please read the notes overleaf before completing this form in BLOCK LETTERS

OFFICE USE

Part 1

About yourself

Your Name

Surname _____
Forenames in full _____

Present Address

Postcode _____

Address on Register in N. Ireland

This might not be your present address - see notes overleaf

Postcode _____

Part 2

Reason for this application

Details of occupation, service or employment - complete one section only *Delete as appropriate

(a) *I am/my spouse is employed by _____
of (address) _____
as _____ (employment details)
and I am unable to go in person to the polling station because _____

OR

(b) I am self-employed as _____ (details)
at (address) _____
and I am unable to go in person to the polling station because _____

Your Signature

(THIS MUST BE SIGNED BY THE ELECTOR PERSONALLY)

Date _____

Part 3

Post or proxy voting?

Please read the notes overleaf before you fill in either the By Post or the By Proxy section

If you choose to vote by post give here the U.K. address to which the ballot paper is to be sent. Then go to Part 4.

By Post

Address _____
Postcode _____

OR

By Proxy

If you choose to vote by proxy give the name and address of your proxy below.
First make certain that the person is capable of being appointed proxy and willing to vote on your behalf

Proxy's full name _____
Proxy's address _____
Proxy's relationship to you (if any) _____

Now ask your proxy to sign the statement below (you may sign it yourself instead if you wish). Then go to Part 4.
person named above as proxy has been consulted and is capable of being and willing to be appointed to vote on behalf of the applicant.

PART 4 MUST BE COMPLETED

Proxy's or Applicant's Signature

_____ Date _____

Part 4

Declaration in support

Please read the notes overleaf then ask the employer or in the case of a self-employed person someone else, to complete ONE of the declarations below as appropriate.

Attestation on behalf of employed person or spouse
I certify that the statements included in this application are true. I also certify that I am the employer of the employed person or authorised to attest on behalf of the employer.

Signature _____ Date _____
Name of attestor (BLOCK LETTERS) _____
Employer's name and address _____
Position held, if not employer _____

OR

Attestation on behalf of self-employed person or the spouse of such a person
I certify that the statements included in this application are true. I also certify that I am 18 years of age or over, I reside in the United Kingdom, I know the self-employed person named but I am not related to that person, by being the husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild.

Signature _____ Date _____
Name (BLOCK LETTERS) _____
Address _____

Warning

A FINE OF UP TO £2,500 CAN BE INCURRED BY ANYONE WHO ON THIS APPLICATION MAKES A STATEMENT HE/SHE KNOWS TO BE FALSE, OR SIGNS AN APPLICATION WHEN NOT AUTHORISED TO DO SO, OR SIGNS AN APPLICATION WHICH HE/SHE KNOWS CONTAINS A FALSE STATEMENT.

Notes Overleaf →

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Approved _____ Date _____ Disallowed _____ Date _____

About this form

This form tells me that you want to vote by post, or get someone else to vote on your behalf, at elections for an indefinite period. It is for people who have a right to vote but who cannot reasonably be expected to vote in person at their polling station because of the nature of their job (or their spouse's). This form is a legal document and your vote may depend on it. Fill it in carefully using BLOCK LETTERS throughout - except for your signature. Each elector must apply on a separate form - so for example a married couple who want to apply need two forms.

About Part 1

1. Fill in your full name and present address in the spaces provided. The 'Address on Register in N. Ireland' is the address under which you are entered in the current Register of Electors. I cannot give you a postal or proxy vote unless you are registered within Northern Ireland and give the correct address.
 - Most people who are on my register can vote at all elections. Unless you tell me otherwise, or if my register shows that you are allowed to vote only at certain types of election, I shall consider your application for a postal or proxy vote to be for all Elections (Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland elections).
 - If you are living at your present address since before 16 September last year then it is likely that you are registered for your present address. In that case just write 'as above'.
 - If you have changed address within the last 16 months, it is possible that you are still registered at your previous address and not at your present address. If you are in any doubt you should check the register and fill in the address given there (copies of the register should be available at sub-post offices in that ward and Electoral Office for the area).
 - If you are registered to vote as a service voter, an overseas elector, or following a 'patient's declaration', the address you give should be that for which you are registered as an elector.

About Part 2

- Now give details of your or your spouse's job and explain why you need to vote by post or proxy, e.g. "I am employed on an Oil Rig in the North Sea and away from home for a number of weeks at a time over the election". The spouse of such a person can also apply if away on polling day accompanying the husband/wife. Full details should be given in Part 2(a).

DON'T FORGET TO SIGN AND DATE PART 2

About Part 3

You can choose whether you want to vote by post or get someone else (called a 'proxy') to vote on your behalf either at the polling station or by post. You cannot choose both. If you prefer a postal vote, fill in the address to which I should send your ballot paper. It must be within the U.K..

If you decide to apply to vote by proxy you must find someone suitable to agree to act for you before giving me his or her name. You must also sign, or get your proxy to sign, the special statement on the application form. Not everyone is allowed to act as a proxy. Your proxy must:

- be a British citizen, other Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Republic of Ireland, of voting age and not subject to any legal incapacity to vote
- **not** have agreed to act as proxy for more than two electors. He/she is however allowed to act as proxy for any number of his/her relatives (husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild)

Note too that:

- if I grant you a postal vote you are not allowed to vote instead at the polling station
- if I grant you a vote by proxy you may vote in person, but only if your proxy has not already voted on your behalf or has not applied for a postal vote to vote on your behalf.

About Part 4

The rules covering your application say that you must get someone to certify that what you say in Part 2 is true. If you are employed, or the spouse of the employed person, get the employer or someone who is authorised by the employer to sign the declaration on his/her behalf. The person making the attestation must enter the position held by him/her.

If you are self-employed, or the application is made on the basis that your spouse is self-employed, the declaration can be filled in by anybody who knows the self-employed person so long as he/she is not a relative i.e. husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild, is aged 18 or over, resides in the United Kingdom and knows that what you have said in your application is true.

How to return this form

Make sure that all four parts of the form are properly filled in, and that you have signed and dated it. Then return it to the Deputy Electoral Officer for the area in which you are registered to vote. The office address is in the phone book under 'Electoral Office'. If I grant your application, you will automatically be allowed a postal or proxy vote at all Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland elections, unless my register shows that you are allowed to vote only at certain types of election. I will make inquiries about your case from time to time but you should tell the appropriate Deputy Electoral Officer at once if there is any change in the information given on this form.

POSTAGE MUST BE PAID BY THE APPLICANT

APPLICATION TO VOTE BY POST OR PROXY FOR AN INDEFINITE PERIOD OWING TO A NECESSARY JOURNEY BY AIR OR SEA

 WARD No. _____
 ELECTORAL No. _____

OFFICE USE

Please read the notes overleaf before completing this form in BLOCK LETTERS

Part 1**About yourself****Your****Name**

Surname _____

Forenames in full _____

**Present
Address**

This might not be your present address - see notes overleaf

Postcode _____

**Address on
Register in
N. Ireland**

Postcode _____

**Reason for
this Application**

I hereby apply for a postal or proxy vote at Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland elections because I cannot go in person from the address for which I am registered as an elector to the polling station allotted to me without making a journey by air or sea.

Signature

(THIS MUST BE SIGNED BY THE ELECTOR PERSONALLY)

Date _____

Part 2**Post or proxy voting?**

Please read the notes overleaf before you fill in either the By Post or the By Proxy Section

If you choose to vote by post give here the U.K. address to which the ballot paper is to be sent.

By Post

Address _____

Postcode _____

OR

By ProxyIf you choose to vote by proxy give the name and address of your proxy below. *Either you or your proxy must confirm that he/she is willing, and is allowed, to vote on your behalf - please read the notes overleaf*

Proxy's full name _____

Proxy's address _____

Postcode _____

Proxy's relationship to you (if any) _____

CONFIRMATION THAT THE PERSON IS PREPARED TO ACT AS PROXYPLEASE COMPLETE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING. *Either you or your proxy must confirm that he/she is willing, and is allowed, to vote on your behalf - please read the notes overleaf***Either**(a) **Confirmation by the elector only***I have consulted the person named above and I confirm that he/she is willing and is allowed to vote on my behalf***Applicant's Signature** → _____

Date _____

OR

(b) **Confirmation by the proxy***I, the person named above, confirm that I am willing and allowed to vote on behalf of the applicant***Proxy's Signature** → _____

Date _____

Warning

A FINE OF UP TO £2,500 CAN BE INCURRED BY ANYONE WHO ON THIS APPLICATION MAKES A STATEMENT HE /SHE KNOWS TO BE FALSE.

Notes Overleaf →

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Approved _____ Date _____ Disallowed _____ Date _____

**How to fill in this form - Important advice
from the Chief Electoral Officer**

About this form

This form tells me that you want to vote by post, or get someone else to vote on your behalf, at elections for an indefinite period. It is for people who have a right to vote but who cannot go in person from the address for which they are registered as an Elector to the polling station allotted to them without making a journey by air or sea. This form is a legal document and your vote may depend on it. Fill it in carefully using BLOCK LETTERS throughout - except for your signature. Each elector must apply on a separate form - so for example a married couple who want to apply need two forms.

About Part 1

Fill in your full name and present address in the spaces provided. The 'Address on Register in N. Ireland' is the address under which you are entered in the current Register of Electors. I cannot give you a postal or proxy vote unless you are registered within Northern Ireland and give the correct address.

- Most people who are on my register can vote at all elections. Unless you tell me otherwise, or if my register shows that you are allowed to vote only at certain types of election, I shall consider your application for a postal or proxy vote to be for all elections (Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland elections).
- If you are living at your present address since before 16 September last year then it is likely that you are registered for your present address. In that case just write 'as above'.
- If you have changed address within the last 16 months, it is possible that you are still registered at your previous address and not at your present address. If you are in any doubt you should check the register and fill in the address given there (copies of the register should be available at sub-post offices in that ward and Electoral Office for the area).
- If you are registered to vote as a service voter, an overseas elector, or following a 'patient's declaration', the address you give should be that for which you are registered as an elector.

DON'T FORGET TO SIGN AND DATE PART 1

About Part 2

You can choose whether you want to vote by post or get someone else (called a 'proxy') to vote on your behalf either at the polling station or by post. You cannot choose both. If you prefer a postal vote, fill in the address to which I should send your ballot paper. It must be within the U.K..

If you decide to apply to vote by proxy, and you have consulted your proxy and can confirm that he/she is willing and is allowed to act for you, then only you need sign in the space provided at 2(a). Otherwise, your proxy must also sign his/her name in the space provided at 2(b). Not everyone is allowed to act as a proxy. Your proxy must:

- be a British citizen, other Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Republic of Ireland, of voting age and not subject to any legal incapacity to vote
- not have agreed to act as proxy for more than two electors. He/she is however allowed to act as proxy for any number of his/her relatives (husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild)

Note too that:

- if I grant you a postal vote you are not allowed to vote instead at the polling station
- if I grant you a vote by proxy you may vote in person, but only if your proxy has not already voted on your behalf or has not applied for a postal vote to vote on your behalf.

How to return this form

Make sure that each part of the form is properly filled in, and that you have signed and dated it. Then return it to the Deputy Electoral Officer for the area in which you are registered to vote. The office address is in the phone book, under 'Electoral Office'. If I grant your application, you will automatically be allowed a postal or proxy vote at all Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland elections, unless my register shows that you are allowed to vote only at certain types of election or you become registered for a different address. I will make inquiries about your case from time to time but you should tell the appropriate Deputy Electoral Officer at once if there is any change in the information given on this form.

POSTAGE MUST BE PAID BY THE APPLICANT

APPLICATION TO VOTE BY POST OR PROXY FOR AN INDEFINITE PERIOD ON GROUNDS OF PHYSICAL INCAPACITY

Please read the notes overleaf before completing this form in BLOCK LETTERS

Name of your District Council

Ward N°

Electorate N°

PART 1

About yourself

Your Name

Surname

Present Address

Forenames in full

Address on Register in N. Ireland

Postcode

This might not be your present address - see notes overleaf

Postcode

Reason for this Application

I hereby apply for a postal or proxy vote at Parliamentary, European Parliament and Northern Ireland elections by reason of physical incapacity. The nature of my physical incapacity is as follows:

Your Signature

(THIS MUST BE SIGNED BY THE ELECTOR PERSONALLY)

Date

PART 2

Post or Proxy voting?

Please read the notes overleaf before you fill in either the By Post or the By Proxy section. If you choose to vote by post give here the U.K. address to which the ballot paper is to be sent. Then have Part 3 completed.

By Post

Address

Postcode

OR

By Proxy

If you choose to vote by proxy give the name and address of your proxy below. First make certain that the person is capable of being appointed proxy and willing to vote on your behalf.

Proxy's Full Name

Proxy's Address

Proxy's relationship to you (if any)

Now ask your proxy to sign the statement below (you may sign it yourself instead if you wish).

The person named above as proxy has been consulted and is capable of being and willing to be appointed to vote on behalf of the applicant.

Proxy's or Applicant's Signature

Date

PART 3

Declaration in support

To be completed by
• a registered medical practitioner
• or a registered nurse within the meaning of Section 10(7) of The Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979
• or a Christian Science practitioner.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the person named in Part 1 opposite is suffering from the physical incapacity stated and because of that physical incapacity cannot reasonably be expected to attend the polling station in person or to vote unaided there. (Please give the precise physical illness especially if the reasons given by the applicant in Part 1 are not specific.)

PHYSICAL ILLNESS

I further attest that he/she

- * is being treated by me;
- * is receiving care from me in respect of that physical incapacity;

IMPORTANT
delete as appropriate otherwise application is invalid.

and that it is likely to continue * indefinitely; * for a period of _____ months.

Declarant's full name (BLOCK LETTERS)

Declarant's qualification

Declarant's address

Declarant's Signature

Date

WARNING

A FINE OF UP TO £5,000 CAN BE INCURRED BY ANYONE WHO ON THIS APPLICATION MAKES A STATEMENT HE/SHE KNOWS TO BE FALSE, OR SIGNS AN APPLICATION WHEN NOT AUTHORISED TO DO SO, OR SIGNS AN APPLICATION WHICH HE/SHE KNOWS CONTAINS A FALSE STATEMENT.

Approved

Date

Disallowed

Date

Applicant Notified

Date

Comments

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

How to fill in this form - Important advice from the Chief Electoral Officer

About this form

This form tells me that you want to vote by post, or get someone else to vote on your behalf, at elections for an indefinite period. It is for people who have a right to vote but who cannot reasonably be expected to vote in person at their polling station because of physical incapacity. This form is a legal document and your vote may depend on it. Fill it in carefully using BLOCK LETTERS throughout - except for your signature. Each elector must apply on a separate form - so for example a married couple who want to apply need two forms.

About Part 1

1. Fill in your full name and present address in the spaces provided. The 'Address on Register in N. Ireland' is the address under which you are entered in the current Register of Electors. I cannot give you a postal or proxy vote unless you are registered within Northern Ireland and give the correct address.
 - Most people who are on my register can vote at all elections. Unless you tell me otherwise, or if my register shows that you are allowed to vote only at certain types of election, I shall consider your application for a postal or proxy vote to be for all elections (Parliamentary, European Parliamentary, and Northern Ireland elections).
 - If you are living at your present address since before 16 September then it is likely that you are registered for your present address. In that case just write 'as above'.
 - If you have changed address since then, it is possible that you are still registered at your previous address and not at your present address. If you are in any doubt you should check the register and fill in the address given there (copies of the register should be available at sub-post offices in that ward and Electoral Office for the area).
 - If you are registered to vote as a service voter, an overseas voter, or following a 'patient's declaration', the address you give should be that for which you are registered as an elector.
2. Now give the FULL reason for your application, please tell me what is the general nature of your physical incapacity which makes it unreasonable for you to be expected to vote in person (eg 'I have serious difficulty in walking because of severe arthritis').

DON'T FORGET TO SIGN AND DATE PART 1

About Part 2

You can choose whether you want to vote by post or get someone else (called a 'proxy') to vote on your behalf either at the polling station or by post. You cannot choose both. If you prefer a postal vote, fill in the address to which I should send your ballot paper. It must be within the U.K.

If you decide to apply to vote by proxy you must find someone suitable to agree to act for you before giving me his/her name. You must also sign, or get your proxy to sign, the special statement on the application form. Not everyone is allowed to act as a proxy. Your proxy must:

- be a British citizen, other Commonwealth citizen, or other citizen of the European Union, of voting age and not subject to any legal incapacity to vote
- not have agreed to act as a proxy for more than two electors. He/she is however allowed to act as proxy for any number of his/her relatives (husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild)

Note too that:

- if I grant you a postal vote you are not allowed to vote instead at the polling station
- if I grant you a vote by proxy you may vote in person, but only if your proxy has not already voted on your behalf or has not applied for a postal vote to vote on your behalf.

About Part 3

The rules covering this application say that you must find someone else, who must be a medically qualified person and is treating you for the physical incapacity stated in Part 1 OR from whom you are receiving care in respect of that physical incapacity, to support what you say in your application.

He/she can be a:

- registered medical practitioner or
- registered nurse within the meaning of Section 10(7) of the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979 or
- Christian Science practitioner

THE DECLARANT SHOULD CAREFULLY READ THE DECLARATION BEFORE SIGNING IT.

Make sure that all three parts of the form are properly filled in, and that you have signed and dated it. Then return it to the Electoral Office at the address opposite.

If I grant your application, you will automatically be allowed a postal or proxy vote at all Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland elections, unless my register shows that you are allowed to vote only at certain types of election. I will make inquiries about your case from time to time but you should notify the relevant Office if there is any change in the information given on this form.

How to return this form

Address to which completed form should be returned

[Blank area for return address]

WARD No. _____
ELECTORAL No. _____

SPECIAL APPLICATION FORM FOR USE ONLY BY REGISTERED BLIND PERSONS OR THOSE IN RECEIPT OF THE HIGHER RATE OF THE MOBILITY COMPONENT OF A DISABILITY LIVING ALLOWANCE BECAUSE OF A PHYSICAL INCAPACITY AND WISH TO VOTE BY POST OR PROXY FOR AN INDEFINITE PERIOD

Please read the notes overleaf before completing this form in **BLOCK LETTERS**

Part 1		About yourself	OFFICE USE
Your Name	Surname	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Your Name	Forenames in full	_____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Present Address	_____	Postcode _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Address on Register in N. Ireland	This might not be your present address - see notes overleaf		<input type="checkbox"/>
Reason for this Application	I hereby apply for a postal or proxy vote at Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland Elections by reason of: PLEASE COMPLETE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING:		<input type="checkbox"/>
Blindness	I am registered as a blind person by the _____ Health and Social Services Board. <i>(Enter the name of the Health Board with which you are registered)</i>		} OR
OR			
Mobility Allowance	I receive the higher rate of the mobility component of a disability living allowance under section 37ZC of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Act 1975 because of a physical incapacity, which is _____		<input type="checkbox"/>
Your Signature	(THIS MUST BE SIGNED BY THE ELECTOR PERSONALLY) _____ Date _____		<input type="checkbox"/>
Part 2	Post or proxy voting?	Please read the notes overleaf before you fill in either the By Post or the By Proxy Section	
By Post	If you choose to vote by post give here the U.K. address to which the ballot paper is to be sent. Address _____ Postcode _____		} OR
OR			
By Proxy	If you choose to vote by proxy give the name and address of your proxy below. <i>Either you or your proxy must confirm that he/she is willing, and is allowed to vote on your behalf - please read the notes overleaf</i> Proxy's full name _____ Proxy's relationship to you (if any) _____ Proxy's address _____ Postcode _____		<input type="checkbox"/>
Either	CONFIRMATION THAT THE PERSON IS PREPARED TO ACT AS PROXY PLEASE COMPLETE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING. <i>Either you or your proxy must confirm that he/she is willing, and is allowed, to vote on your behalf - please read the notes overleaf</i>		
	(a) Confirmation by the elector only	<i>I have consulted the person named above and I confirm that he/she is willing and is allowed to vote on my behalf</i> Applicant's Signature _____ Date _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
OR	(b) Confirmation by the proxy	<i>I, the person named above, confirm that I am willing and allowed to vote on behalf of the applicant</i> Proxy's Signature _____ Date _____	<input type="checkbox"/>
Warning	A FINE OF UP TO £2,500 CAN BE INCURRED BY ANYONE WHO ON THIS APPLICATION MAKES A STATEMENT HE/SHE KNOWS TO BE FALSE.		
		Notes Overleaf →	

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Approved _____ Date _____ Disallowed _____ Date _____

About this form

This form tells me that you want to vote by post, or get someone else to vote on your behalf, at elections for an indefinite period. It is for people who have a right to vote but who cannot reasonably be expected to vote in person at their polling station because of blindness and are registered as a blind person or receive the higher rate of the mobility component of a disability living allowance because of physical incapacity. This form is a legal document and your vote may depend on it. Fill it in carefully using BLOCK LETTERS throughout - except for your signature. Each elector must apply on a separate form - so for example a married couple who want to apply need two forms.

About Part 1

1. Fill in your full name and present address in the spaces provided. The 'Address on Register in N. Ireland' is the address under which you are entered in the current Register of Electors. I cannot give you a postal or proxy vote unless you are registered within Northern Ireland and give the correct address.
 - Most people who are on my register can vote at all elections. Unless you tell me otherwise, or if my register shows that you are allowed to vote only at certain types of election, I shall consider your application for a postal or proxy vote to be for all elections (Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland Elections).
 - If you are living at your present address since before 16 September last year then it is likely that you are registered for your present address. In that case just write 'as above'.
 - If you have changed address within the last 16 months, it is possible that you are still registered at your previous address and not at your present address. If you are in any doubt you should check the register and fill in the address given there (copies of the register should be available at sub-post offices in that ward and Electoral Office for the area).
 - If you are registered to vote as a service voter, an overseas elector, or following a 'patient's declaration', the address you give should be that for which you are registered as an elector.
2. Now give the reason for your application. If it is on the grounds that you are registered blind I need to know the name of the Health and Social Services Board with which you are registered. If it is on the grounds that you receive the higher rate of the mobility component of a disability living allowance due to physical incapacity (under section 37ZC of the Social Security (Northern Ireland) Act 1975) please state the nature of your physical incapacity.

DON'T FORGET TO SIGN AND DATE PART 1

About Part 2

You can choose whether you want to vote by post or get someone else (called a 'proxy') to vote on your behalf either at the polling station or by post. You cannot choose both. If you prefer a postal vote, fill in the address to which I should send your ballot paper. It must be within the U.K..

If you decide to apply to vote by proxy and you have consulted your proxy and can confirm that he/she is willing and is allowed to act i.e. you, then only you need sign in the space provided at 2(a). Otherwise, your proxy must also sign his/her name in the space provided at 2(b). Not everyone is allowed to act as a proxy. Your proxy must:

- be a British citizen, other Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Republic of Ireland, of voting age and not subject to any legal incapacity to vote
- **not** have agreed to act as proxy for more than two electors. He/she is however allowed to act as proxy for any number of his/her relatives (husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild)

Note too that:

- if I grant you a postal vote you are not allowed to vote instead at the polling station
- if I grant you a vote by proxy you may vote in person, but only if your proxy has not already voted on your behalf or has not applied for a postal vote to vote on your behalf.

How to return this form

Make sure each part of the form is properly filled in, and that you have signed and dated it. Then return it to the Deputy Electoral Officer for the area in which you are registered to vote. The office address is in the phone book, under 'Electoral Office'. If I grant your application, you will automatically be allowed a postal or proxy vote at all Parliamentary, European Parliamentary and Northern Ireland Elections, unless my register shows that you are allowed to vote only at certain types of election. I will make inquiries about your case from time to time but you should tell the appropriate Deputy Electoral Officer at once if there is any change in the information given on this form.

POSTAGE MUST BE PAID BY THE APPLICANT

**APPLICATION TO VOTE BY POST OR PROXY
BECAUSE OF A CHANGE OF ADDRESS**

RPF 8(NI)

District No. _____
Ward No. _____
Electoral No. _____

Please read the notes overleaf before completing this form in BLOCK LETTERS

Part 1 About yourself

Your name Surname _____

Forenames in full _____

Old Address This must be the address under which you are presently registered as an elector

Postcode _____

New Address

Postcode _____

I hereby apply for a postal or proxy vote at Parliamentary, European Parliamentary, Northern Ireland Assembly and District Council elections on the grounds that I am no longer living at my registered address and the application is to apply until I am no longer registered there.
(THIS MUST BE SIGNED BY THE ELECTOR PERSONALLY)

Your signature → _____ Date _____

Part 2 Post or proxy voting?

Please read the notes overleaf before you fill in either the By Post or the By Proxy section

By Post → If you choose to vote by post give here the U.K. address to which the ballot paper is to be sent.

OR _____ Postcode _____

By Proxy → If you choose to vote by proxy give the name and address of your proxy below. *Either you or your proxy must confirm that he or she is willing, and is allowed, to vote on your behalf - please read the notes overleaf.*

Proxy's full name _____

Proxy's address _____

Postcode _____

Proxy's relationship to you (if any) _____

CONFIRMATION THAT THE PERSON IS PREPARED TO ACT AS PROXY.

PLEASE COMPLETE ONE OF THE FOLLOWING. Either you or your proxy must confirm that he or she is willing, and is allowed, to vote on your behalf - please read the notes overleaf.

EITHER → (a) Confirmation by the elector only

I have consulted the person named above and I confirm that he/she is willing and is allowed to vote on my behalf

Applicant's signature → _____ Date _____

OR → (b) Confirmation by the proxy

I, the person named above, confirm that I am willing and allowed to vote on behalf of the applicant

Proxy's signature → _____ Date _____

Applicant's Signature → _____ Date _____

Warning A FINE OF UP TO £2,000 CAN BE INCURRED BY ANYONE WHO ON THIS APPLICATION MAKES A STATEMENT HE OR SHE KNOWS TO BE FALSE. Notes overleaf

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Approved _____ Date _____ Disallowed _____ Date _____

Office use

OR

About this form

This form is to enable people who have moved house to apply to vote by post or by proxy at all elections while they are registered as electors for their old address.

The electoral register is compiled each year, based on a qualifying date of 15 September. It comes into force on the following 16 February and remains in force for all elections for one year. You are registered as an elector for the address where you were living on the qualifying date. So, for example, if you moved house between January and 15 September in any year, you must wait until 16 February in the following year before you become registered for your new address; if you moved between 16 September and December, you will have to wait until 16 February in the next year but one.

In the meantime, you can only vote at elections in the area where you used to live provided you are registered as an elector there. This form will save you having to apply for a postal or proxy vote at each election.

This form is a legal document and your vote may depend on it. Fill it in carefully using BLOCK LETTERS throughout - except for your signature. Each elector must apply on a separate form - so for example a married couple who want to apply will need two forms.

About Part 1

Fill in your full name, your old address and your new address in the spaces provided. Your old address must be the address for which you are currently registered as an elector. I cannot give you a postal or proxy vote unless you are on my Register of Electors. Your new address is where you are now living.

The rules covering your application say that your old address and your new address must not be in the same ward. Contact the Deputy Electoral Officer for your area (see the phone book for address and telephone number under 'Electoral Office') if you are in any doubt about whether your new address is in a different ward from your old one.

About Part 2

You can choose whether you want to vote by post or get someone else (called a 'proxy') to vote on your behalf either at the polling station or by post. You cannot choose both. If you prefer a postal vote, fill in the address to which I should send your ballot paper. It must be within the U.K..

If you decide to apply to vote by proxy and you have consulted your proxy and can confirm that he or she is willing and is allowed to act for you, then only you need sign in the space provided at 2(a). Otherwise, your proxy must also sign his or her name at 2(b). Not everyone is allowed to act as a proxy. Your proxy must:

- be a British citizen, other Commonwealth citizen or a citizen of the Republic of Ireland, of voting age and not subject to any legal incapacity to vote
- not have agreed to act as a proxy for more than two electors including yourself. He/she is however allowed to act as proxy for any number of his/her relatives (husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild).

Note too that:

- if I grant you a postal vote you are not allowed to vote instead at the polling station
- if I grant you a vote by proxy you may vote in person, but only if your proxy has not already voted on your behalf or has not applied for a postal vote to vote on your behalf.

How to return this form

Make sure each part of the form is properly filled in, and that you have signed and dated it. Then return it to the Deputy Electoral Officer for the area which covers your old address. Your application can only be dealt with by the Deputy Electoral Officer for the area in which you are currently registered as an elector. The office address is in the phone book.

POSTAGE MUST BE PAID BY THE APPLICANT.

If I grant your application, you will be given a postal or proxy vote at any Parliamentary, European Parliamentary, Northern Ireland Assembly or District Council election which takes place while the register which you are on is in force, in the area where you used to live (unless my register shows that you are allowed to vote only at certain types of election).

How to get on the register for your new address

You will qualify to register as an elector for your new address once you become resident there on 15 September in any year. The Deputy Electoral Officer for your new address will send you a registration form (and a canvasser will visit you in person) in August or September. If you moved into your new address after then (but before 15 September) and have not received a form or a visit, then contact the Deputy Electoral Officer.

The draft register is published on 28 November, and between then and 16 December you can check at the sub-post office in your ward or electoral office for your area to make sure that your name has been included. If it has not (and provided you were living in the area on 15 September) you can apply to have your name added.

APPLICATION TO VOTE BY POST OR PROXY AT A PARTICULAR ELECTION

Please read the notes overleaf before completing this form in **BLOCK LETTERS**.

PART 1 Name of your District Council _____

Your Name, Present Address and Postcode

Surname _____

Forenames in Full _____

Present Address _____

Postcode _____

Your Registered Address (if different)

Registered Address _____

Postcode _____

Date of Election My application is for the forthcoming election to be held on _____ (date of poll).

Reason for this Application

Important – see notes overleaf. Give detailed reasons why you need an absent vote:
I cannot reasonably be expected to vote in person at my polling station at that election because –

Your Signature

THIS MUST BE SIGNED BY THE ELECTOR PERSONALLY

Date _____

PART 2

Post or proxy voting?

Please read the notes overleaf and then fill in either the By Post or the By Proxy Section – One Only Please

By Post

If you choose to vote by post give here the U.K. address to which the ballot paper is to be sent.
Then go to Part 3 below.

Address _____

Postcode _____

OR By Proxy

If you choose to vote by proxy give the name and address of your proxy below.

First make certain that the person is capable of being appointed proxy and willing to vote on your behalf.

Proxy's full name _____

Proxy's relationship to you (if any) _____

Proxy's address _____

Postcode _____

Now ask your proxy to sign the statement below (you may sign it yourself instead if you wish). Then go to Part 3 below.

The person named above as proxy has been consulted and is capable of being and willing to be appointed to vote on behalf of the applicant. Part 3 below should be completed.

PROXY'S OR APPLICANT'S SIGNATURE

Date _____

PART 3

Declaration in support

Read the notes overleaf then ask someone else not related to you to complete ONE of the declarations below as appropriate.

A. To be completed by

- a registered medical practitioner
- or a registered nurse within the meaning of Section 10 (7) of The Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979
- or a Christian Science practitioner.

OR

B. For completion by person other than those mentioned in A

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the statement included in Part 1 of this application is true. I also certify that I am aged 18 years or over, I reside in the United Kingdom, I know the applicant, I am *not* related to the applicant by being the husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild, and I have **not** supported any other elector's application in respect of the election for which this application is made.

To the best of my knowledge and belief, the person named in Part 1 above is suffering from the physical incapacity stated and because of that physical incapacity cannot reasonably be expected to attend the polling station in person on the day of the poll.

Declarant's full name
 (BLOCK LETTERS) _____

Declarant's
 qualification _____

Declarant's address _____

Declarant's full name
 (BLOCK LETTERS) _____

Declarant's address _____

Declarant's Signature

Date _____

Declarant's Signature

Date _____

WARNING

A FINE OF UP TO £5,000 CAN BE INCURRED BY ANYONE WHO ON THIS APPLICATION MAKES A STATEMENT HE OR SHE KNOWS TO BE FALSE, OR SIGNS AN APPLICATION WHEN NOT AUTHORISED TO DO SO, OR SIGNS AN APPLICATION WHICH HE OR SHE KNOWS CONTAINS A FALSE STATEMENT.

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

WARD N° _____

Electoral N° _____

S _____

H. Ref. _____

Approved _____

Date _____

Disallowed _____

Date _____

NOTES OVERLEAF

About Part 1

This form tells me that you wish to vote by post or by proxy, as the case may be, at a particular election. It is for people who have a right to vote at that election but who cannot reasonably be expected to vote in person at their polling station on the day of the poll. This form is a legal document and your vote may depend on it.

- Fill it in carefully using BLOCK LETTERS throughout – except for your signature. Each elector must apply on a separate form – so, for example, a married couple who wish to apply need two forms.
- It is important that you supply me with as full details as possible of the reason for your request. Before allowing any application I have to be satisfied that the person is indeed entitled.

About Part 1

1. If the details of your name and relevant address(es) have not already been entered when you receive this form fill in your full name, present address, postcode and registered address (if different) in the spaces provided. Your Registered Address is normally the address under which you are entered in the current Register of Electors. I cannot give you a postal or proxy vote unless you are registered as an elector within Northern Ireland and give the Registered Address.
 - If you have been living at your present address since before 16 September last year then it is likely that you are registered under your present address. In that case just write 'same'.
 - If you have changed address within the last 16 months, it is possible that you are still registered at your previous address and not at your present address. If you are in any doubt you should check the register and fill in the address given there (copies of the register should be available at sub-post offices in that ward and electoral office for the area).
 - If you are registered to vote as a service voter, or by means of a 'patient's declaration', please ensure that the address you give is that under which you are registered. Your relevant address should be given for the receipt of the postal ballot paper.
2. Now fill in the date of the election at which you wish to vote by post or by proxy and state the FULL reason for your application. Explain where you expect to be on polling day and why you cannot reasonably be expected to vote in person, eg "I shall be away on holiday at a polling day". (Name the exact location and duration of holiday). If the application is because of physical illness please give full details of that illness.
 - **DON'T FORGET TO SIGN AND DATE PART 1.**

Remember you can only apply to vote at the ONE election on this form.

About Part 2

You can choose whether you wish to vote by post or get someone else (called a 'proxy') to vote on your behalf. You cannot choose both. If you prefer a postal vote, fill in the address to which I should send your ballot paper. It must be within the U.K. Postal ballot papers are normally sent out about a week before polling day, so if you are not likely during that period to be at that address, you should consider choosing a proxy.

If you decide to apply to vote by proxy you must find someone suitable to agree to act for you before giving me his or her name. You must also sign, or get your proxy to sign, the special statement on the application form. Not everyone is allowed to act as a proxy. Your proxy must:

- be a British citizen, other Commonwealth citizen, or other citizen of the European Union, of voting age and not subject to any legal incapacity to vote;
- not have agreed to act as a proxy for more than two electors. He/she is however allowed to act as proxy for any number of his/her relatives (husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild).

Note too that:

- if I grant you a postal vote you are not allowed to vote instead at the polling station;
- if I grant you a vote by proxy you may vote in person, but only if your proxy has not already voted on your behalf or has not successfully applied to vote by post on your behalf.

About Part 3

The rules covering this application say that you must find someone to support what you say in your application.

- If the application is because of a physical illness you may have it supported by a
 - registered medical practitioner or
 - registered nurse within the meaning of Section 10(7) of the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979 or
 - Christian Science practitioner.

These people are allowed to support more than one application.

OR

The application can be signed by anyone who:

- is 18 years of age or over
- resides in the United Kingdom
- knows you but is not a relative (husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild)
- has not supported ANY other application for this election.

THE DECLARANT SHOULD CAREFULLY READ THE DECLARATION BEFORE SIGNING IT.

How to return this form

NOTE THE WARNING AT THE FOOT OF THE FRONT OF THIS FORM.

You must make sure that this application reaches me by 5 p.m. on _____ . Please post to:

ABSENT VOTING SECTION
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER
HEADQUARTERS
ST. ANNE'S HOUSE, 3rd FLOOR
15 CHURCH STREET, BELFAST BT1 1ER

NOTE If there is no date given on the form, the closing date is 5 p.m., 11 working days before polling day (working days exclude Saturdays, Sundays, Bank Holidays, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day).

There is a separate form RPF 9B(NI) for people who need a postal or proxy vote due to unforeseen health reasons that have arisen AFTER the normal closing date for applications.

LATE APPLICATION TO VOTE BY POST OR PROXY AT A PARTICULAR ELECTION BECAUSE OF HEALTH REASONS

Please read the notes overleaf before completing this form in BLOCK LETTERS.

WARD No. _____

ELECTORAL No. _____

PART 1 Name of your District Council

Your Name, Present Address and Postcode

Surname _____

Forenames in Full _____

Present Address _____

Postcode _____

Your Registered Address (if different)

Registered Address _____

Postcode _____

Date of Election

My application is for the forthcoming election to be held on (date of poll).

Reason for this Application

Important – see notes overleaf. Give the reason (full details please) why you need a postal or proxy vote and say why you could not have made the application earlier

(a) Reason for application _____
_____(b) Reason why application could not have been made BEFORE 5pm on _____

Your Statement and Signature

I hereby state that BEFORE 5 pm on _____ I could not have reasonably foreseen that the above circumstances would, or would be likely to, exist on polling day

Date _____

This must be signed by the elector **PERSONALLY**

PART 2

Post or proxy voting?

Please read the notes overleaf before you fill in either the By Post or the By Proxy Section. – One only please.

By Post

If you choose to vote by post give here the U.K. address to which the ballot paper is to be sent. Then have Part 3 below completed.

Address _____

Postcode _____

OR

By Proxy

If you choose to vote by proxy give the name and address of your proxy below.

First make certain that the person is capable of being appointed proxy and willing to vote on your behalf

Proxy's full name _____

.oxy's address _____ Postcode _____

Proxy's relationship to you (if any) _____

Now ask your proxy to sign the statement below (you may sign it yourself instead if you wish). Then have Part 3 below completed.

The person named above as proxy has been consulted and is capable of being and willing to be appointed to vote on behalf of the applicant.

PART 3 MUST BE COMPLETED

PROXY'S OR APPLICANT'S SIGNATURE

Date _____

PART 3

Declaration in support

- To be completed by
- a registered medical practitioner
 - or a registered nurse within the meaning of section 10(7) of The Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979
 - or a Christian Science practitioner.

I hereby state that, so far as I am aware, the statement by the applicant that he/she could not have made the application earlier, for the reason given, is true.

(Please give the precise nature of the illness especially if the reasons given by the applicant in Part 1 are not specific.)

ILLNESS _____

Declarant's full name (BLOCK LETTERS) _____ Declarant's qualification _____

Declarant's address _____

Declarant's Signature

Date _____

WARNING

A FINE OF UP TO £5,000 CAN BE INCURRED BY ANYONE WHO ON THIS APPLICATION MAKES A STATEMENT HE OR SHE KNOWS TO BE FALSE, OR SIGNS AN APPLICATION WHEN NOT AUTHORISED TO DO SO, OR SIGNS AN APPLICATION WHICH HE OR SHE KNOWS CONTAINS A FALSE STATEMENT.

FOR OFFICE USE ONLY

Approved _____ Date _____ Disallowed _____ Date _____

About this form

This form tells me that you want to vote by post, or get someone else to vote on your behalf, at a particular election. It is for people who, for health reasons, cannot reasonably be expected to vote in person at their polling station but who could not reasonably have foreseen this in time to make an application before the normal closing date (eleven working days before the date of the election). This form is a legal document and your vote may depend on it. Fill it in carefully using BLOCK LETTERS throughout – except for your signature. Each elector must apply on a separate form – so for example a married couple who want to apply need two forms.

About Part 1

1. If the details of your name and relevant address(es) have not already been entered when you receive this form fill in your full name, present address, postcode and registered address (if different) in the spaces provided. **Your Registered Address** is normally the address under which you are entered in the current Register of Electors. I cannot give you a postal or proxy vote unless you are registered as an elector within Northern Ireland and give the Registered Address.
 - If you have been living at your present address since before 16 September last year then it is likely that you are registered under your present address. In that case just write 'same'.
 - If you have changed address within the last 16 months, it is possible that you are still registered at your previous address and not at your present address. If you are in any doubt you should check the register and fill in the address given there (copies of the register should be available at sub-post offices in that ward and electoral office for the area).
 - If you are registered to vote as a service voter, an overseas elector, or by means of a 'patient's declaration', please ensure that the address you give is that under which you are registered. Your relevant address should be given for the receipt of the postal ballot paper.
2. Now fill in the date of the election at which you wish to vote by post or by proxy. Then say why you cannot reasonably be expected to vote in person, and why you could not have made the application earlier, eg 'I have become ill with since the normal closing date for applications' or 'I have just been told that I will be admitted to hospital before polling day'.

DON'T FORGET TO SIGN AND DATE PART 1.

IF INSUFFICIENT DETAILS ARE GIVEN THE APPLICATION CANNOT BE ALLOWED.

Remember you can only apply to vote at the ONE election on this form.

About Part 2

You can choose whether you wish to vote by post or get someone else (called a 'proxy') to vote on your behalf. You cannot choose both. If you prefer a postal vote, fill in the address to which I should send your ballot paper. **It must be within the U.K.** Postal ballot papers are normally sent out about a week before polling day, so if you are not likely during that period to be at that address, you should consider choosing a proxy.

If you decide to apply to vote by proxy you must find someone suitable to agree to act for you before giving me his or her name. You must **also** sign, or get your proxy to sign the special statement on the application form. Not everyone is allowed to act as a proxy. Your proxy must:

- be a British citizen, other Commonwealth citizen, or other citizen of the European Union, of voting age and not subject to any legal incapacity to vote;
- **not** have agreed to act as a proxy for more than two electors. He/she is however allowed to act as proxy for any number of his/her relatives (husband, wife, parent, grandparent, brother, sister, child or grandchild).

Note too that:

- if I grant you a postal vote you are not allowed to vote instead at the polling station;
- if I grant you a vote by proxy you may vote in person, but only if your proxy has not already voted on your behalf or has not successfully applied to vote by post on your behalf.

About Part 3

The rules covering this application say that you must find someone else, who must be a medically qualified person to support what you say in your application.

He/she can be a:

- registered medical practitioner or
- registered nurse within the meaning of section 10(7) of the Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors Act 1979 or
- Christian Science practitioner

THE DECLARANT SHOULD CAREFULLY READ THE DECLARATION BEFORE SIGNING IT.

How to return this form

NOTE THE WARNING AT THE FOOT OF THE FRONT OF THIS FORM.

You must make sure that this application reaches me by 5 pm on _____

Please hand in or post to:

ABSENT VOTING SECTION
OFFICE OF THE CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER
HEADQUARTERS
ST ANNE'S HOUSE
3RD FLOOR
15 CHURCH STREET
BELFAST BT1 1ER
POSTAGE MUST BE PAID BY THE APPLICANT

OR

Address to which completed form should be returned

NOTE: If there is no date given on the form, the closing date is 5 pm, 6 working days before polling day (working days exclude Saturdays, Sundays, Bank Holidays, Maundy Thursday, Good Friday, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day). This form is only for applications made between 5 pm on the 11th working day and 5 pm on the 6th working day before the date of the election. Earlier applications should be made on Form RPF 9A(NI).

Section 200(1) states that the Electoral Commission shall, in the period of the local general elections in 1989 and 1993, the details were given in my annual reports covering those periods. At the time 1993 the details were given in my annual report covering that period. Under the present regulations applying to general voting the Electoral Commission is responsible for the details of the arrangements for the holding of the poll. It is not required to give details of the arrangements for the holding of the poll.

There is nothing in Section 200(1) which requires the Electoral Commission to produce any of the prescribed qualifications documents before being invited to conduct a ballot paper. What concerns has been expressed is whether there was any doubt about the appropriateness of the inclusion of additional candidates in the list of prescribed candidates. There could be no doubt that it was necessary to include additional candidates in the list of prescribed candidates in order to ensure that the Electoral Commission was able to conduct a ballot paper in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act. The Electoral Commission is not required to give details of the arrangements for the holding of the poll. It is not required to give details of the arrangements for the holding of the poll. It is not required to give details of the arrangements for the holding of the poll.

APPENDIX F

EXTRACT FROM

CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER'S

ANNUAL REPORT 1993-94

The Electoral Commission is pleased to have been able to conduct the 1993-94 general election in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act. The Electoral Commission is pleased to have been able to conduct the 1993-94 general election in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act.

The Electoral Commission is pleased to have been able to conduct the 1993-94 general election in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act. The Electoral Commission is pleased to have been able to conduct the 1993-94 general election in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act.

Of course it is important that the Electoral Commission should be given the greatest possible assistance in the conduct of its duties. The Electoral Commission is pleased to have been able to conduct the 1993-94 general election in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act.

At the time of the general election arrangements for the holding of the poll were made in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act. The Electoral Commission is pleased to have been able to conduct the 1993-94 general election in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act.

The Electoral Commission is pleased to have been able to conduct the 1993-94 general election in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act. The Electoral Commission is pleased to have been able to conduct the 1993-94 general election in accordance with the provisions of the Electoral Act.

SECTION 1

1. The first section of the report discusses the overall objectives and scope of the study. It outlines the research questions and the methodology used to collect and analyze the data.

SECTION 2

- 2. This section provides a detailed description of the data sources and the methods used for data collection. It includes information on the sample size, the data collection period, and the specific techniques employed.
- 3. The analysis of the data is presented in this section, showing the results of the statistical tests and the interpretation of the findings. It discusses the significance of the results and their implications for the research objectives.
- 4. The final section of the report is a conclusion that summarizes the main findings and provides recommendations for future research. It also discusses the limitations of the study and the potential for further exploration of the research questions.

APPENDIX

The appendix contains supplementary information that supports the main text of the report. It includes raw data, detailed calculations, and other relevant information that is not included in the main body of the report.

SECTION 3

SECTION 3

EXTRACT FROM

CHIEF ELECTORAL OFFICER'S

ANNUAL REPORT 1987-88

This section provides a detailed description of the data sources and the methods used for data collection. It includes information on the sample size, the data collection period, and the specific techniques employed.

SECTION 4

SECTION 4

SECTION 5

SECTION 5

CONFIDENTIAL

SECTION 6

4.9 Absent Voting Abuse

Serious absent voting abuse was identified at the previous two local general elections, in 1989 and 1985. The details were given in my annual reports covering those periods. At the May 1993 local elections, such abuse was also identified. Under the present regulations applying to absent voting the potential for abuse is considerable. Such abuse strikes at the very heart of the democratic process. It is not confined to one political party or group.

Voters attending in person at the polling station have to produce one of the prescribed identification documents before being entitled to receive a ballot paper. Whilst concern has been expressed in various quarters about the appropriateness of the inclusion of medical cards in the list of prescribed documents, those cards being relatively easy to forge, there is, nevertheless, the additional safeguard of the right of a polling agent to challenge an elector at the polling station including the right to have an arrest effected on grounds of alleged personation. (To facilitate the effective discharge of a polling agent's duties each ward's electoral register is divided up into blocks of electors—each such block being the allocation of electors to a specific ballot box. Thus polling agents can, if they so wish, familiarise themselves in advance with the precise electorate at the ballot box, or boxes, they intend to cover at elections. Such allocations remain constant from election to election during the currency of that particular register and indeed there are, in the main, only marginal changes from year to year.)

In contrast applications for both postal and proxy voting are generally received at my offices by post or delivered, usually in bulk, by party agents. The subsequent proxy appointments or postal votes are, in turn, delivered by post. In other words it is the exception rather than the rule that electoral office staff actually see the applicants or even members of their family acting on their behalf. That is understandable and particularly so in the case of those living at a distance from the office or where the application is made on the grounds of, say, physical incapacity. It does however, and unfortunately so, facilitate the abuse of the system that is so evident. At the same time the safeguard afforded to the voting process at the polling station, by way of the production of a specified document and a possible challenge by a polling agent, does not apply to postal voting.

Despite considerable efforts to control absent voting abuse and extensive police investigations at my request over the past six years or so, there has not been a single prosecution let alone a conviction obtained during that period. The difficulty is, apparently, linking the perpetrators to the evidence clearly available.

I again have to advise that there is the need to reappraise the absent voting provisions and regulations with a view to identifying means by which actual and potential abuse can be more effectively controlled and to facilitate the conviction of those involved in the abuse of the system.

Of course it is important that due recognition be given to the genuine need of absent voting arrangements for those sections of the community who, though eligible to vote, would otherwise in effect be disfranchised. A proper balance has to be obtained. It is my considered view that such a balance does not presently prevail.

Abuse of the absent voting arrangements, be it benign or malignant, can have a considerable impact on electoral results. That is especially so at local elections where not only can a single vote determine the outcome of an individual seat but, in certain areas, which party or political group controls a council. It is relevant to point out that such abuse does take place elsewhere in the United Kingdom as, for example, recent court cases can indeed testify. In Northern Ireland, due to the special circumstances appertaining here, such abuse does have a far greater potential to influence election results. That may especially be the case should elections or referenda result from the ongoing political talks.

Two recent cases in London, relating to the 1993 local elections there, are, for illustrative purposes, of particular relevance to the matter under discussion. The first relates to the case in the High Court with regards to a seat in the Eel Brook ward of the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham. A dispute had arisen over whether or not a vital proxy vote cast on behalf of an elderly woman should

Section 1001 of the Voting Rights Act of 1965 provides that in any primary election in which the number of votes cast for a particular candidate is less than the number of votes cast for any other candidate, the candidate with the most votes shall be declared the winner. This is the "winner-take-all" rule. The present regulations provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner.

When a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner. This is the "winner-take-all" rule. The present regulations provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner. This is the "winner-take-all" rule. The present regulations provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner.

In certain situations, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner. This is the "winner-take-all" rule. The present regulations provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner. This is the "winner-take-all" rule. The present regulations provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner.

Despite the fact that the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner, the present regulations provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner.

It is the policy of the State to provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner.

Of course, the present regulations provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner.

Again, the present regulations provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner.

Two more times in the past, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner. This is the "winner-take-all" rule. The present regulations provide for a runoff election if no candidate receives a majority of the votes in the primary election. If a runoff election is held, the candidate with the most votes in the runoff election shall be declared the winner.

be allowed to count after it had been disclosed that a vote had already been cast in her name. In the end the Judges ruled that the proxy vote should stand which meant that the two candidates involved had an equality of votes. The court ruled that lots be drawn and, consequently, the previously unsuccessful candidate was declared the winner.

The other case concerned allegations of abuse in Hackney, East London involving the Northfield ward. The Returning Officer launched an inquiry into allegations concerning some 200 votes—enough, if improper, to have affected the result involving the election of three councillors by narrow margins. The allegations did not suggest that the three councillors or their agents were involved. It was reported that some 114 proxy votes were cast against the norm of between 20 and 30. The remaining votes referred to, some 80 in number, were allegedly obtained by personation or double voting at the polling stations. A newspaper report of the case also referred to the successful prosecution of the chairman of a political party's regional agents' association where a penalty of £750 was reported after complaints had been lodged that the agent had falsely obtained proxy forms and allegedly used them to his party's advantage at the May 1993 local general elections in North London.

Obviously then such abuse is not confined to Northern Ireland or, indeed, to local elections. It is however, probably more effective at local elections due to the smaller electorate involved and the closeness of a number of results. Returning to England for an example at a parliamentary election, one can instance the enquiry carried out by the Devon and Cornwall Constabulary.

The enquiry concerned alleged irregularities and possible offences relating to proxy voting in part of the Penrith District within the St. Ives constituency at the last parliamentary general election. I understand that after detailed investigations and referral to the Crown Prosecution Service it was determined that there was insufficient evidence to obtain a successful prosecution. In other words the outcome was the same that has been obtained in Northern Ireland in similar circumstances over recent years. That there has been abuse and offences committed is beyond doubt—obtaining the required evidential link is most difficult.

That apparent difficulty can be illustrated by an investigation carried out by the Royal Ulster Constabulary in connection with allegations of electoral abuse at the October 1993 local by-election in Derry City Council area. The investigation was launched at my request. It confirmed that there was indeed a significant level of abuse. A file was prepared for submission to the Director of Public Prosecutions who subsequently determined that there was insufficient evidence to support a successful prosecution.

The details, and background, to the investigation are as follows.

One of the councillors for the Cityside District Electoral Area of Derry City Council resigned and, at a special council meeting held on 1 September 1993, the Council failed to fill the vacancy by co-option. Accordingly a by-election was necessary. The poll was set for 21 October 1993.

Shortly before polling day reports of alleged electoral malpractice began to circulate in the area in relation to absent voting. These reports were, I understand, discussed at the September and October monthly meetings of Derry City Council. Allegations and counter allegations were reportedly made between two political parties within the council. On 16 November 1993 the City Solicitor notified me by letter of the contents of two resolutions passed by the council.

The first resolution was as follows.

“The last Local Government Election saw the most serious undermining of democracy in the shape of fraud, forgery and personation in the polling booth since the gerrymandering of wards that crucified Derry for generations.

We relay our concern to the Secretary of State, the Minister responsible and the Chief Electoral Officer that abuse of the present system of identification has reached such a peak as to render the system a failure and a positive threat to the democratic system that Derry strove so hard to achieve.”

be allowed to proceed after a full and complete investigation of the facts and circumstances of the case. The Commission is of the opinion that the proposed action is not in the best interests of the public and should not be approved.

The other case was the application of the Commission for the proposed action. The Commission is of the opinion that the proposed action is not in the best interests of the public and should not be approved. The Commission is of the opinion that the proposed action is not in the best interests of the public and should not be approved. The Commission is of the opinion that the proposed action is not in the best interests of the public and should not be approved.

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The other resolution condemned all electoral fraud and, *inter alia*, indicated support for any measures which would eliminate fraud provided that they did not infringe on individual rights.

In the run up to polling day I was aware that a number of proxy and postal voting applications received at the area office had given rise to suspicion. Indeed I had called at the office to discuss the events with the Deputy Electoral Officer and decided to refer certain of the applications to the police for investigation. Similar situations have, in the past, been identified at other council elections in various parts of Northern Ireland. They have been commented on in my annual reports covering the periods involved.

After the poll an analysis of the voting figures showed that the total of the number of proxies appointed and the postal votes included in the count was two hundred. The votes polled for the successful candidate amounted to five hundred and fifty three more than the votes for the runner up and three hundred and eighty five more than the combined votes of the runner up and the other candidate. Thus, whatever the level of absent voting abuse, there was no material effect on the result.

In relation to personation at the polling stations the records do not show any challenges having been made by polling agents present at the various polling stations used and no arrests for personation were made. No allegations were, at the time, received by me concerning actual or perceived personation. The letter from the City Solicitor was the only intimation that I received and that some one month after the event.

On 22 November I replied, by letter, to the City Solicitor. I indicated my concern at any abuse perpetrated against the electoral system. Also I pointed out that the matter had already been reported to the police for investigation and requested that the councillors, who would appear from the contents of the resolution to have personal knowledge of the events, assist the police in their enquiries by passing on the appropriate evidence. The police were then requested by me to contact the councillors. I understand that no additional evidence was obtained from those contacts. As previously mentioned, despite considerable efforts by the police in their enquiries, when the file was passed to the Director of Public Prosecutions no prosecutions resulted.

At the May 1993 local general elections similar allegations were made in relation to proxy voting in Dungannon District Council Area. A representative of one of the political parties participating in the election called for the postponement of the local general election in that area until the police investigation had been completed.

The allegations at the Dungannon election centred on proxy voting as opposed to postal voting. Postal voting is at a much higher level overall than proxy voting. Whilst it is important to recognise the potential for abuse in proxy voting the level of abuse of postal voting is higher and has, at least, an equal potential for abuse.

Earlier in this report I referred to benign and malignant abuse. The former I use to refer to false, and indeed forged, applications where the actual postal ballot paper is received by the registered elector concerned or, in the case of proxy voting, where the person appointed as proxy is the person so wished by the elector. In other words, whether due to absence or whatever reason, the actual mechanics of getting the vote exercised are improper but the franchise exercised is that positively desired by the elector.

Substantive evidence has built up to indicate that some parents are applying for postal or proxy voting facilities in the names of their sons or daughters who are either permanently or temporarily away from home. It is apparent that a number of such applications have been submitted without the knowledge, let alone the consent, of the family member named. It appears that such parents are much more anxious for their children's votes to be cast than the electors themselves. So much so that in fact they utter false applications. It is not always the case that sons and daughters share the same identical political affiliations as their parents.

The other necessary element of the bill was the provision for support for my research which would be provided by the sale of the surplus of the stock.

In the run up to polling day I was very busy and I had to leave the office at the office to discuss the matter with the other members of the staff. I decided to refer matters to the other members of the staff and to the other members of the staff. They had been very busy and I had to leave the office at the office.

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My Office has contacted a number of electors for whom absent voting facilities have been requested. The replies received stated that the electors did not request any such facility and certainly had not signed any application. Comparisons between the signatures on the replies and on the application forms certainly have borne that out. When the police have investigated the matter the electors invariably decline to repeat their original statement.

Such abuse of the electoral system is no different from personation at the polling station. At the polling station there is the risk of a challenge and an arrest being made.

The term malignant abuse refers to premeditated abuse, usually by political activists, on a planned basis and, in reality, personation is the objective.

I have already referred to police investigations carried out on suspected electoral abuse. I wish formally to record my appreciation of the work and efforts put into the various investigations by the RUC despite the slight possibility of obtaining, under the present regulations, a successful prosecution.

The police have particular difficulties in carrying out their investigations including the following.

- (1) Where the alleged applicants are outside of Northern Ireland it is particularly difficult to obtain an interview even with the assistance of other police forces.
- (2) Even when it was clearly established that applicants did not even know the proxy or assentor the investigation was thwarted when the proxy or assentor denied signing the form and refused handwriting samples.
- (3) In some instances involving absent or severely infirmed voters, and where all the signatures on the forms were suspected to be false, the investigation could not proceed as specimen signatures were not available.

STATISTICS IN RELATION TO
POSTAL AND PROXY VOTES

The first part of the report is a general introduction to the project. It describes the objectives of the study and the scope of the work. The second part is a detailed description of the methodology used in the study. This includes a description of the data sources, the data collection process, and the data analysis techniques used. The third part of the report is a discussion of the results of the study. This includes a description of the findings and an interpretation of the results. The final part of the report is a conclusion and a list of references.

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DATE FOR ANSWER: 14 JULY 1997

21 JULY 1997

WRITTEN NO. 129

Mr Peter Robinson (Duffry East): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, how many individuals listed on (a) the postal Vote and (b) the proxy vote permanent registers obtained postal and proxy votes for each election since 1992.

(3651)

McMurphy

APPENDIX G

PERMANENT LIST OF ABSENT VOTERS STATISTICS IN RESPECT OF POSTAL AND PROXY VOTES

Year	Date of	Type of	Postal	Proxy	Total
1992	9 April	Parliamentary	1,280	21	1,301
		General			
1993	19 May	Local	2,239	28	2,267
		Government			
1994	9 June	European	Not available		
		Parliamentary			
1996	30 May	Northern Ireland Elections	14,377	21	14,398
1997	1 May	Parliamentary	1,136	35	1,171
1997	21 May	Local Government	1,956	13	1,969

APPENDIX C

STATISTICS IN RESPECT OF
POSTAL AND PROXY VOTES

DATE FOR ANSWER: 14 JULY 1997

31 JULY 1997

WRITTEN NO: 329

Mr Peter Robinson (Belfast East): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, how many individuals listed on (a) the postal Vote and (b) the proxy vote permanent register obtained postal and proxy votes for each election since 1992. (8691)

Mr Murphy

PERMANENT LIST OF ABSENT VOTERS

Year	Date of Election	Type of Election	Postal	Postal Proxy	Proxy	Total
1992	9 April	Parliamentary General	12980	17	2521	15518
1993	19 May	Local Government	8259	28	1642	9929
1994	9 June	European Parliamentary	Not available			
1996	30 May	Northern Ireland Elections	14377	21	1769	16167
1997	1 May	Parliamentary	15236	36	1985	17257
1997	21 May	Local Government	19959	33	2378	22370

21 JULY 1987

DATE FOR ANSWER: 14 JULY 1987

WRITTEN NEW 13

Mr Peter Robinson (Deputy Lord) To all the members of the House of Lords, I have many individuals listed on this page who are not on the list of permanent members. I have obtained postal addresses for each of these individuals. (200)

Mr Robinson

PERMANENT LIST OF ARBROT VOTERS

Year	Date of Election	Type of Election	Total Votes	Local Votes	Foreign Votes
1932	9 April	Parliamentary	1950	17	1933
		Local			
1937	19 May	Local	838	26	812
		Government			
1944	9 June	Parliamentary			No results
		Parliamentary			
1950	30 May	Local	1477	21	1456
		Local			
		Election			
1957	1 May	Parliamentary	1334	28	1306
					(737)
1967	21 May	Local	1922	31	1891
		Government			(737)

WRITTEN NO: 331

Mr Peter Robinson (Belfast East): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, how many applications for (a) postal votes and (b) proxy votes have been refused for each election since 1992.(8692)

Mr Murphy

Until 1996 Absent vote applications were dealt with by area offices and as a consequence no records are available for the numbers of applications refused in previous years. For the 1997 elections a Central Absent Voting Unit was established.

Significant numbers of applications were received in good time but were incomplete and had to be returned to the applicant. In this case each applicant received a letter of explanation and was invited to resubmit their correctly completed form. However large numbers of applications were received in the last hours before cut-off time for receipt of applications and in these circumstances it was not possible to return incomplete applications to applicants.

Parliamentary Election - 1 May 1997

Reason	Number
Applicant not registered elector	320
Received too late	300
Insufficient or no reason	162
Dual/treble attestation	126
Not attested or not properly attested	145
Not signed	66
Medical reason, non-physical illness	98

Medical (not properly completed)	64
Proxy information not completed	9
Letters returned by Post Office	5
Signature not accepted	3
Too late, received after "late" closing date	3
No date of election given	2
Miscellaneous	115
Total	1418

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Medical (not properly completed)
Some information incomplete
Cases returned by Post Office
2 letters not received
Letters received after "last" closing
etc.
Number of letters given
Miscellaneous
Total

Local Government Election - 21 May 1997

Reason	Number
Applicant not registered elector	275
Received too late	398
No reason given	69
Insufficient information	88
Not attested	128
Dual/treble attestation	112
Not signed	121
Medical Non-physical illness	69
Miscellaneous	232
Total	1492

Constituency	Proxy	Postal	Total
Belfast East	114	373	487
Belfast North	101	312	413
Belfast South	94	331	425
Belfast West	80	430	510
East Antrim	189	312	501
East Londonderry	46	1254	1300
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	293	1270	1563
Foyles	118	993	1111
Lagan Valley	118	915	1033
Mid Ulster	77	2529	2606

Local Government Budget - 11 May 1981

Number	Item
101	Administration and general services
102	Revenue and rates
103	Public works
104	Public health and safety
105	Public housing
106	Public recreation
107	Public works and maintenance
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DATE FOR ANSWER: 14 JULY 1997

31 JULY 1997

WRITTEN NO: 333

Mr Peter Robinson (Belfast East): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland if she will list, by constituency, the number of individuals listed on the permanent list for (a) postal votes and (b) proxy votes. (8690)

Mr Murphy

The information is as follows:-

PERMANENT ABSENT VOTERS BY CONSTITUENCY
(as at 18/7/97)

Constituency	Proxy	Postal	Total
Belfast East	114	572	686
Belfast North	101	572	673
Belfast South	98	531	629
Belfast West	80	430	510
East Antrim	189	372	561
East Londonderry	46	1254	1300
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	293	3270	3563
Foyle	116	993	1109
Lagan Valley	118	916	1034
Mid Ulster	77	2529	2606

WRITTEN NO. 28

Mr. Peter ... (Holland East) To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland ... by constituency, the number of ... (a) ... (b) ... (c) ...

The information is as follows-

PERMANENT ABSENT VOTERS BY CONSTITUENCY (as at 18/7/71)

Constituency	Party	Female	Total
Belfast East	112	37	68
Belfast North	101	37	67
Belfast South	92	31	63
Belfast West	80	40	51
East Antrim	130	30	36
East Londonderry	45	124	120
Londonderry & South Tyrone	22	177	287
North Antrim	114	30	100
North Down	116	51	104
South Down	77	129	288

DATE FOR ANSWER: 29 JULY 1997

21 JULY 1997

North Antrim	123	760	883
North Down	150	554	704
Newry & Armagh	77	1656	1733
South Antrim	180	450	630
South Down	264	1909	2173
Strangford	136	705	841
Upper Bann	75	1101	1176
West Tyrone	253	2087	2340
Total	2490	20661	23151

Mr Murphy (holding reply 29 July 1997)

I have viewed with concern allegations that there is a significant level of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. I will study the results of the Chief Electoral Officer's investigations into postal vote applications with interest.

Constituency	Parliamentary General Election: 1 May 1997		Northern Ireland Election: 16 May 1996	
	Total number of postal ballot papers issued	As a percentage of total constituency electorate	Number of Postal Ballot Papers Issued	As a percentage of total constituency electorate
Belfast East	748	1.31 %	635	1.02 %
Belfast North	656	1.01 %	566	0.87 %
Belfast South	694	1.09 %	621	0.97 %
South West	657	1.11 %	458	0.75 %
East Antrim	235	0.95 %	375	0.99 %
East Londonderry	1750	2.97 %	1517	2.59 %
Armagh & South Tyrone	2927	7.63 %	4326	6.81 %

121	100	221	North Austin
122	100	222	North Down
123	100	223	North & Arzaga
124	100	224	North Austin
125	100	225	North Down
126	100	226	North & Arzaga
127	100	227	North Austin
128	100	228	North Down
129	100	229	North & Arzaga
130	100	230	North Austin
131	100	231	North Down
132	100	232	North & Arzaga
133	100	233	North Austin
134	100	234	North Down
135	100	235	North & Arzaga
136	100	236	North Austin
137	100	237	North Down
138	100	238	North & Arzaga
139	100	239	North Austin
140	100	240	North Down
141	100	241	North & Arzaga
142	100	242	North Austin
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151	100	251	North Austin
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154	100	254	North Austin
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163	100	263	North Austin
164	100	264	North Down
165	100	265	North & Arzaga
166	100	266	North Austin
167	100	267	North Down
168	100	268	North & Arzaga
169	100	269	North Austin
170	100	270	North Down
171	100	271	North & Arzaga
172	100	272	North Austin
173	100	273	North Down
174	100	274	North & Arzaga
175	100	275	North Austin
176	100	276	North Down
177	100	277	North & Arzaga
178	100	278	North Austin
179	100	279	North Down
180	100	280	North & Arzaga
181	100	281	North Austin
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183	100	283	North & Arzaga
184	100	284	North Austin
185	100	285	North Down
186	100	286	North & Arzaga
187	100	287	North Austin
188	100	288	North Down
189	100	289	North & Arzaga
190	100	290	North Austin
191	100	291	North Down
192	100	292	North & Arzaga
193	100	293	North Austin
194	100	294	North Down
195	100	295	North & Arzaga
196	100	296	North Austin
197	100	297	North Down
198	100	298	North & Arzaga
199	100	299	North Austin
200	100	300	Total

WRITTEN NO: 8

Mr Robert McCartney (North Down): To ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, if she will list the (a) number and (b) percentage of absent voting papers issued in (i) each parliamentary constituency for the 1996 Forum election and the 1997 general election and (ii) what steps she is taking to reduce electoral fraud.

(10272)

Mr Murphy (holding reply 29 July 1997)

I have viewed with concern allegations that there is a significant level of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland. I will study the results of the Chief Electoral Officer's investigations into postal vote applications with interest.

Constituency	Parliamentary General Election 1 May 1997		Northern Ireland Elections 30 May 1996	
	Total number of postal ballot papers issued	As a percentage of total constituency electorate	Number of Postal Ballot Papers Issued	As a percentage of total constituency electorate
Belfast East	748	1.21 %	635	1.02 %
Belfast North	656	1.01 %	566	0.87 %
Belfast South	694	1.09 %	621	0.97 %
Belfast West	687	1.11 %	458	0.75 %
East Antrim	559	0.95 %	575	0.99 %
East Londonderry	1750	2.97 %	1517	2.59 %
Fermanagh & South Tyrone	4927	7.61 %	4336	6.81 %

Foyle	1102	1.62 %	1081	1.62 %
Lagan Valley	1231	1.73 %	1065	1.52 %
Mid Ulster	3609	6.11 %	2676	4.64 %
North Antrim	1260	1.74 %	1105	1.54 %
North Down	812	1.30 %	713	1.14 %
Newry & Armagh	3021	4.27 %	2174	3.11 %
South Antrim	654	0.94 %	698	1.01 %
South Down	2447	3.50 %	2115	3.06 %
Strangford	1057	1.51 %	872	1.26 %
Upper Bann	1561	2.21 %	1546	2.21 %
West Tyrone	3062	5.24 %	1913	3.34 %
Total	29844	2.53 %	24666	2.12 %

Advance voting is available for a specified 7 days prior to poll day. Proof of identity (document(s) showing name, address and signature) and residence must be produced. Postal vote is available to Canadian citizens who have been residing outside Canada and intend to remain their residence in Canada.

Proxies Advance voting is available for our work. Post Offices are used as polling stations for advance voting but in future some local government premises will also be used. Advance voting is also available in hospitals and certain other institutions. Electors required to prove their identity when voting in advance. Electoral register is checked to prevent double voting.

Proxies The demand for postal and proxy votes must be made personally by the elector at the Town Hall. Certain professions (eg. fishermen, truck drivers) have an automatic right to this type of voting, other electors must provide proof of their absence and inability to vote.

Germany Those requesting a postal vote may apply for a polling card which enables them to vote by post or at another polling station in the same constituency.

Italy Voting by proxy or by post is not permitted. If a person cannot vote personally, he/she issues his vote through for patients in hospitals where polling stations are set up and patients can vote (after identification and electoral ID are handed in).

New Zealand Electors are required to complete a declaration stating the address in respect of which they are enrolled as an elector, Date of Birth, Occupation and the grounds on which they are applying for a vote.

Portugal Advance voting is available at City Council of the elector's area of register between 10h and 18h by vote to the elector card. Hospitals and prisons

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2 19.0	100	2 19.0	100	
2 19.1	100	2 19.1	100	
2 19.2	100	2 19.2	100	
2 19.3	100	2 19.3	100	
2 19.4	100	2 19.4	100	
2 19.5	100	2 19.5	100	
2 19.6	100	2 19.6	100	
2 19.7	100	2 19.7	100	
2 19.8	100	2 19.8	100	
2 19.9	100	2 19.9	100	
2 20.0	100	2 20.0	100	

APPENDIX H

SUMMARY OF PROCEDURES IN OTHER COUNTRIES FOR POSTAL AND PROXY VOTING

- Australia** Declaration by the applicant that he/she is entitled to a postal vote. Declaration has to be signed by applicant in the presence of a witness. Pre-poll voting is also available - application for this facility must be made to any Deputy Returning Officer or Divisional Officer during normal hours. Mobile polling also available at hospitals and similar institutions.
- Austria** Postal votes must be put into special envelope and endorsed with the signatures of two witnesses.
- Brazil** Postal or proxy voting is not allowed. If voters have moved from their electoral district they are allowed paid leave to return to vote. Alternatively they have to justify their absence, and therefore their failure to vote; this is done by filling in the appropriate form and sending it by post to the electoral officer in their district.
- Canada** Advance voting is available for a specified 3 days prior to polling day. Proof of identity (document(s) showing name, address and signature) and residence must be produced. Postal vote is available to Canadian citizens who have been residing outside Canada and intend to resume their residence in Canada.
- Finland** Advance voting is available for one week. Post Offices are used as polling stations for advance voting but in future some local government premises will also be used. Advance voting is also available in hospitals and certain other institutions. Elector required to prove his/her identity when voting in advance. Electoral register is marked to prevent elector voting twice.
- France** The demand for postal and proxy votes must be made personally by the elector at the Town Hall. Certain professions (eg fishermen, truck drivers) have an automatic right to this type of voting; other electors must provide proof of their absence and inability to travel.
- Germany** Those requiring a postal vote may apply for a polling card which entitles them to vote by post or at another polling station in the same constituency.
- Italy** Voting by proxy or by post is not permitted. If a person cannot vote personally, he/she loses his vote except for patients in hospitals where polling stations are set up and patients can vote (after identification and electoral form are handed in).
- New Zealand** Electors are required to complete a declaration stating the address in respect of which they are enrolled as an elector, Date of Birth, Occupation and the grounds on which they are applying for a vote.
- Portugal** Advance voting is available at City Council of the elector's area of register between 10th and 5th day prior to the election date. Hospitals and prison

COMPARISON OF PROCEDURES IN OTHER COUNTRIES FOR VOTING AND PARTY

Country	Description of Voting Procedure
Australia	The election by the electors of the House of Representatives is held by secret ballot in the presence of a scrutineer. The ballot is not available - application for the ballot must be made to the Electoral Commission of Australia. The ballot is not available to the elector until the day of the election.
Canada	Advance voting is available for a specified period prior to the election. The ballot is not available until the day of the election. The ballot is not available to the elector until the day of the election.
France	Advance voting is available for a specified period prior to the election. The ballot is not available until the day of the election. The ballot is not available to the elector until the day of the election.
Germany	Those receiving a postal vote may apply for a ballot and which will be sent to them by post or to another polling station in the same constituency.
Japan	Voting by proxy is by post if not possible. If a proxy cannot vote personally, the ballot paper for vote cannot be placed in the ballot box unless the proxy is up and present and vote (after identification and detection from the ballot box).
New Zealand	Electors who request to complete a declaration under the provisions of section 101 of the Electoral Act 1993, may apply for a ballot which they are entitled to receive. The ballot is not available until the day of the election.
Switzerland	Advance voting is available at City Council of the district and between 10:00 and 20:00 hours on the election day. The ballot is not available to the elector until the day of the election.

electors are provided with ballot papers which are then collected by the City Council services. Portuguese residents abroad are entitled to a postal vote provided that they are included in the electoral register in the Consulate of their area of residence. Voting by proxy is not allowed.

SUMMARY OF PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION

- Albania** Electors must produce photographic identification such as identity card, military book or passport. If elector has not photographic evidence he/she is required to apply from the civil status office to obtain a certificate of identification. This certificate must be produced together with a photograph when voting.
- Argentina** In a secret election in June, a ballot found seal, which could only be seen under the reflection of special rays was put on the heads of each secret ballot voter.
- Australia** On polling day, those wishing to vote need only give their names and are not asked for any form of identification.
- Austria** Voters must show their personal ID card or passport at polling stations except in small villages where voters is known to members of Electoral Commission.
- Brazil** Voters must present photographic identification when they vote. Invisible indelible fluorescent ink is applied to the fingers of the voter to be checked by polling station officials under ultraviolet lamps before issuing a ballot paper.
- Canada** When the voter arrives at the polling centre they have to present their identity document and voting card. They are then obliged to sign a register, and the returning officer checks that this matches the signature on their voting card and identity card.
- Finland** All electors are required to prove their identity which could be confirmation card which is mailed to electors before election. The confirmation card is used by most electors for practical purposes instead of producing an ID card or passport. The information on the confirmation card is checked against the electoral register before ballot paper is handed over. Confirmation card is left with electoral officer.
- France** On arrival at the polling station, each voter is required to present his national identity card (or recognised proof of identity from a specified list of documents which include passport, driving licence and resident's permit) and voting card to prove that elector is attached to that particular polling station.
- Germany** Voters must produce the electoral notification card before each election together with their personal photographic identity card.
- Italy** All Italians must possess a photographic document of identification (ID Card, Driving License, Passport). When at polling station, elector must have valid identification and electoral form, which is delivered to each elector prior to the election.

electors are provided with information about the effect of the City
Council services. Particular attention should be given to a general view
provided that they are included in the electoral register in the Council of the
area of interest. Voting is made as follows:

SUMMARY OF PROCEDURES IN OTHER COUNTRIES FOR THE PREVENTION OF PERSONATION

- Albania** Electors must produce photographic identification such as identity card, military book or passport. If elector has not photographic evidence he/she is required to apply from the civil status office in his/her area for a special certificate for voting. This certificate must be produced together with a photograph when voting.
- In a recent election in June, a ballot liquid seal, which could only be seen under the reflection of special rays was put on the hands of each elector that voted.
- Australia** On polling day, those wishing to vote need only give their names and are not asked for any form of identification.
- Austria** Voters must show their personal ID card or passport at polling stations except in small villages where voter is known to members of Electoral Commission.
- Bosnia** Voters must present photographic identification when they vote. Invisible indelible fluorescent ink is applied to the fingers of the voter to be checked by polling stations officials under ultraviolet lamps before issuing a ballot paper.
- Brazil** When the voter arrives at the polling centre they have to present their identity document and voting card. They are the obliged to sign a register, and the returning officer checks that this matches the signature on their voting card and identity card.
- Finland** All electors are required to prove his/her identity which could be notification card which is mailed to electors before election. The notification card is used by most electors for practical purposes instead of producing an ID card or passport. The information on the notification card is checked against the electoral register before ballot paper is handed over. Notification card is left with electoral officer.
- France** On arrival at the polling station, each voter is required to present his national identity card (or recognised proof of identity from a specified list of documents which include passport, driving licence and resident's permit) and voting card to prove that elector is attached to that particular polling station.
- Germany** Voter must produce the election notification issued before each election together with their personal photographic identity card.
- Italy** All Italians must possess a photographic document of identification (ID Card, Driving Licence, Passport). When at polling station, elector must have valid identification and electoral form which is delivered to each elector prior to the election.

SUMMARY OF PROCEDURES IN OTHER COUNTRIES FOR THE INVESTIGATION OF FUGITIVES

Australia	Factors must include photographic identification and a search of identity book or passport. If there is no photographic evidence, a search is made of the civil status office for the name and for a search of the identity book. Verification must be provided together with a photograph of the fugitive.
Austria	The search for the fugitive is done by the police and the army. The search is done in the form of a search.
Canada	The search for the fugitive is done by the police and the army. The search is done in the form of a search.
Denmark	The search for the fugitive is done by the police and the army. The search is done in the form of a search.
France	The search for the fugitive is done by the police and the army. The search is done in the form of a search.
Ireland	All errors are reported to the police and the army. The search is done in the form of a search.
Italy	On arrival at the police station, the fugitive is reported to the police. The search is done in the form of a search.
Germany	The search for the fugitive is done by the police and the army. The search is done in the form of a search.
Japan	All fugitives must provide a photographic document of identification (ID Card). During the search, the fugitive is reported to the police and the army. The search is done in the form of a search.

New Zealand Electors are not required to produce any documents before ballot papers are handed over. The only requirement is that the name of the elector must be identified as being on the local district electoral roll.

Portugal Electors must produce an identity card or any updated identification document with photograph. If identification document cannot be provided, the elector can be identified by two registered electors present who testify that that person is a full citizen or by unanimous identification by the members of the electoral board present.

Factors are not required to provide any documents before being
handed over. The only requirement is that the name of the factor shall be
identified as being on the list of factors.

with Zealand

Factors must provide in every case a copy of the relevant documents
with photographs. If identification documents cannot be provided, the factor can
be identified by two separate means, viz. (a) the name of the factor in a
list drawn up by the relevant authorities in the name of the relevant
person.

Factors

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- Forms

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

APPENDIX K

MR D STEWART
(DISABILITY ACTION)

ORAL EVIDENCE

APPENDIX K

ORAL EVIDENCE

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM
FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Thursday 19 July 1997

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

ELECTORAL REFORM

Witness
Mr D Stewart

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

**MR D STEWART
(DISABILITY ACTION)**

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

MR D STEWART
(DISABILITY ACTION)

**NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM
FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE**

COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Thursday 10 July 1997

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

on

ELECTORAL REFORM

Witness:

Mr D Stewart

The Chairman: Welcome Mr Stewart and thank you for attending this morning.

The Committee has been established to investigate the operation of the electoral system in Northern Ireland. One of the areas that it is interested in is the accessibility of polling stations to disabled people. Would you like to make your presentation and then we can ask you some questions.

Mr Stewart: Thank you ladies and gentlemen. I think most of you will know of or will have heard of Disability Action. This is an organization which promotes the aims and objectives of disabled people so that they may enjoy the physical environment that we able-bodied people enjoy and often take for granted. Disability Action has its main office in Belfast. It has offices in Londonderry, Dungannon, Newry and Carrickfergus. I think in total we probably employ 70 to 80 people; some part-time. We are by far the biggest organization

of that kind and certainly we feel represent disabled people, probably more widely in their aspects than any other organization.

I am an Access Officer in that organization. There should be four of us — one has recently left and his post is being filled. There is one in Derry, one in Belfast and one in Dungannon. Sufficient to say in Northern Ireland, some of this panel may know the figures, but there are approximately 202,000 people in Northern Ireland who suffer from some form of disability. A higher proportion are physical but there is quite a lot sensory as well, and as I have said before our aims and objectives are to promote the environment, not just inside the buildings but throughout, including paths, dropped kerbs, paving; all aspects of the environment outside the building so that disabled people, no matter what the nature of their disability, can enjoy the same privilege and they are not in any way discriminated against in Northern Ireland.

It is very difficult to start to look in any way at polling stations. I might tell you that I spent up to 35 years as an architect in Northern Ireland in public places and I enjoyed a chief post here in Belfast in Education and Libraries until I went abroad. During all my time as an architect and then as a senior person in the built environment we never concerned ourselves very much with disabled people at all. I would just say that during the last six years in my association with Disability Action it has helped me to be aware of the needs which still exist in that sector in our community. I am not sure Chairman whether I am giving you the sort of information that you are looking for, but if I were to perhaps give you a brief summary of the sort of acts and the orders that we think impinge on people to make a better environment for disabled people, and in mentioning these I will make comment and sometimes criticism. I

will leave out Design Note 18 which is a paper by the Department of Education almost 20 years ago in respect to schools or school buildings. I will come back to that one.

There is the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act of 1978. The town planning service uses this Act. They mention it in a planning condition — unfortunately it is not a condition, it is a planning consent. They mention it as what they call an affirmative not a condition and that means to say that they simply draw your attention to the requirements of that Act but make no specific condition relating to it in the planning consent. That is an organization, or an authority, who can talk about the shape of your roof, the colour of your tiles, the type of your windows, the nature of the very density in which you live, the siting of a building, a hundred different ways in which they give planning consent to a building. Yet it seems to me they still can not just add a little clause about the needs of disabled people. That is where planning permission is given, an interim development and not requiring building control. We are continually hammering away at that one. Disabled Persons Act (Northern Ireland) 1982 — that does not seem to feature very much in any of it.

The main one is part R of the building regulations which, I am sure most of you will be aware of. It is now impossible to have a building erected or designed where the needs of disabled people are not fully met, but could I point out this is only in respect of new or modified buildings. Remember 80% to 85% of our existing building is old stock. Part R of the building regulations does not refer to them. There is a code for housing but as you know there is no legislation yet for accessibility for housing. There is a code BS5810 which is a code of practice for the access of disabled people to buildings and that is an important one. There is also one as late as 1989 which talks and makes clarification and conditions. Part 8 of

that Act; means of escape for disabled people from buildings. Then, of course, we come right up to just November of last year. The DDA — the Disability Discrimination Act — we hope that when there is some case law, this will help to clarify and make it better.

I see from your resolutions Chairman that the third part asks to provide suitable and convenient polling stations. I have some difficulty in finding out numbers and percentages as the electoral office referred me to all sorts of places. It could not give me the information. I finally got some quite interesting information about Belfast itself. Out of 86 polling stations in Belfast, 57 are schools. Knowing the schools in Belfast as I did until 1984, I would say the number of them which are accessible would be as low as 2% or 3%, apart from not having facilities for toilets and that kind of thing.

Throughout the province there may be a slightly higher percentage of polling stations in village halls and the like. I am sorry I do not come with that information. I would say the figures for Belfast would be a fair indication and if we think about the schools then I would refer you again to my very opening statement about Design Note 18 produced by the Department of Education in 1978 which states clearly that all buildings including libraries should be accessible, but no one has ever made it a condition when one is submitting plans to the Department, and I know a fair bit about this, or considered the financial implications of providing for it. In fact, even yet the Department of Education is extremely luke-warm in relation to disabled entrance into schools.

Mr Neeson: I appreciate your presentation. In your opening remarks you referred to over 200,000 people in Northern Ireland suffering with disabilities of one degree or another.

You did raise the whole question of sensory disability and it is of particular interest to myself because I chair an organization called SENSE which deals with the blind and deaf, and I am just wondering whether or not you get any feedback in relation to people suffering from sensory disabilities in relation to the whole voting procedure in Northern Ireland. Do you have any comments to make in relation to the present procedures?

Mr Stewart: I feel I must confess that I am a little bit at sea on that one. I know we have a lot of contact with RBNI and also the other one, but there would be other people in my organization better equipped to answer your question. But the answer is that we do take very seriously, the needs of people with sensory disabilities. I mean that I should point out that a high percentage of my time is spent vetting plans. There again with no statutory authority. The Department of the Environment give us lists of all the plans and I would visit all the planning authorities from Killeel to Ballycastle on the eastern seaboard. The other two would do the rest of the province and the north-west, but we would look at every single plan and look at the needs of the disabled including if, for example, there was lifts — we would want to see as well as the bell and the numbers for each floor, we would want to feel the indentations so that a blind person may feel the number. We would go into that a great deal more now than we would have done five or six years ago. Probably not enough yet, but we liaise fairly closely with those two organizations associated with the sensory disabilities.

Ms Purvis: There are also people with learning disabilities. What would you do with anybody with learning disabilities and have you any sort of feedback with regard to them?

Mr Stewart: The answer is personally, no. But in our organization there would be such people. I think a great deal of untapped resource has to come in there yet I think.

Ms Purvis: That sort of begs the question about availability of information with regard to voting and clarification of it and things like that.

Mr Dodds: Thank you Mr Chairman and thank you Mr Stewart for being here this morning. Could I ask you first of all whether or not there is any process whereby the Chief Electoral Officer who is responsible for designating polling stations and so on, would consult in the same way that the planning authorities would perhaps liaise with you. Is there a process at the moment, either formal or informal, whereby the Chief Electoral Officer would run by your organization or similar organization, the location of polling stations in the particular sites. And just as a follow-up to that could you tell us whether in fact you received many complaints from people with disabilities about polling stations, any particular stations or just generally about their inaccessibility or otherwise?

Mr Stewart: I think the answer to your first question is unfortunately no. We found that organization quite on a pedestal. We do not hear as much from them as we would like and we do not have the dialogue, particularly coming up to elections and that kind of thing. The second part is that sorry ..

Mr Dodds: The second one was just the reverse of that whether from people with disabilities ...

Mr Stewart: Yes, we do get a fair amount of. We have a fair increase in calls from people to find out if such a place is accessible, and of course with so many polling stations coming up to an election it is impossible to get out to do an access audit. There are certain people who ring up every year and complain, and rightly so, because I do not know whether you have found this or not, but I have found in my experience that disabled people are fiercely independent, they are notoriously independent. They do not want to be taken and lifted up steps in a wheelchair. They want to come themselves and vote in their own time and I think that this is a very important section of this. So the answer is yes, we do get quite a lot.

Mr Dodds: Just to follow up on something. The main sorts of complaints that you are getting would be mainly about things like steps and people not being able to get up and down steps, and what else

Mr Stewart: No car parking close to the polling station. Maybe dropped kerbs might be another one close to schools or polling booths.

A Member: Polling booths themselves.

Mr Stewart: Polling booths, yes. A very good point. We had some years ago the question of how a person in a wheelchair negotiates voting in a restricted area; with very great difficulty must be the answer, with great difficulty.

Mr Stoker: Basically, my question was along the same line but just to take it a wee bit further. Would you know in your own personal experience if there are lots of disabled people who will not come out to vote because of that access problem?

Mr Stewart: Not personally. I cannot with all honesty tell you personally, but knowing disabled people, I would say there would be a lot of people. It is not like ringing up and saying I will take you to vote. Even ambulant disabled, they want to decide. I would say the answer to that would be quite a percentage of people just would not. As you know voting can be quite a lackadaisical thing anyway and I would have thought the answer is quite a considerable number.

Mr Robinson: I want to come to the question of postal voting, but just before I do I wonder if I could just clarify your response to Mr Dodd's question. He asked whether there was a consultative process where the Chief Electoral Officer or one of his staff would consult you at the stage when they were preparing their polling stations scheme. You indicated in your response to him that they did not, but you went a little further and indicated that you felt that they were somewhat on a pedestal and you did not have the degree of consultation that you would have liked with them which might be in common with a number of other people's views about the consultation of this office. Can I ask you quite directly and pointedly, has the Chief Electoral Officer or his staff ever initiated contact with your organization concerning polling stations at all?

Mr Stewart: I must start by telling you that I, although I held chief posts in the public sector, I am a relatively lowly person in Disability Action. I would hazard a guess;

hardly, if any. Now Monica Wilson is a very popular person and she may have had dialogue with Mr Bradley or someone else from the Electoral Office, but I would have thought that it would have been minimal, quite honestly, but I could not be exacting on that. I could not give you a yes or no on that.

Mr Neeson: Would it be possible then to provide the Committee in written form with information as to whether or not that has happened in the past?

Mr Stewart: I could try to suggest. I will try to get that.

Mr Robinson: And in what area of consultation was it carried out if it was. The issue of postal votes — a number of people who are disabled will be so disabled that they are unable to make their way to a polling station and therefore they would require if they intend to vote to apply for a postal vote. Has there been any representation to your organization in relation to the complexity of the postal voting system, its adequacy or any details in relation.

Mr Stewart: I just am an Access Officer concerned with the physical side. I could take a note of it but I cannot honestly answer you that question in case I would vindicate myself.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: You are very welcome along to the Committee and I appreciate the evidence you have given to date. My question really goes back to the point that the Chairman asked you in his first question about people with sensory difficulties. Would it be of any benefit to have a ballot paper and advice to electors prepared in Braille?

Mr Stewart: My immediate response to that is surely yes, it would be. I do not know if there is a precedent, I am not sure to be quite honest, I should know. I feel a bit naked here and am unable to answer questions in respect of sensory disability, but I would have thought that yes, and we have done things here in Northern Ireland that have spearheaded other ideas. It would not be a bad thing if someone pursued that.

Mr Ford: You talked about 2% or 3% of schools being fully accessible to disabled people. That would horrify me slightly but when you say that I take it you mean accessible totally on the level to somebody manipulating their own wheelchair say. Have you any figures for, for instance, the greater degree of difficulty. It seems to me that rather more than 97% of schools would be accessible to people with minor disabilities, that there would be some which would be virtually inaccessible to deal with any kind of severity of disability. Have you any kind of general figures for how severe the problems would be.

Mr Stewart: No we would not have. We know of schools, we can give you for example, supporting session or not, I suspect not, Grosvenor High School is a school now which we know is accessible and has lifts to every floor and that is a utopian situation for schools.

Mr Robinson: That is probably why they use Orangefield instead.

Mr Stewart: It is very difficult actually to have figures. I feel a little bit unprepared coming to a meeting like this, but you can take it as read that accessibility in school design did not come about or raise its head to be solved by architects or anyone else until literally, seven or eight years ago. And even yet if an existing school is very difficult we try, we get applications every day for extensions to school steps everywhere. We have got to be vigilant, and we have no statutory authority but we do embarrass them and we do put it through to the Department of Education. I feel the Department are very much in question here, I have always felt that.

Mr Paisley: Mr Stewart have you ever sat down, or has your organization ever sat down and actually prepared a list of acceptable buildings throughout Northern Ireland?

Mr Stewart: We did at my instigation when I came here first, we did an access survey of buildings — mostly commercial — within a one mile radius of the city hall in Belfast and produced a report — you may know it — ‘The Access Guide to Belfast’. And that was quite good and it made people aware that some of the big shops are not accessible for wheelchairs and other disabled people.

To go further, Mr Paisley to your point is the manpower. We exist on a tiny enough budget for what we do. But we are always open to new ideas about doing these things.

Mr Paisley: It might be worthwhile if the wherewithal were to be found financially to commission a survey that would look at the province-wide accessibility to public buildings

and then indicate by grading those buildings which are the most accessible and which should therefore be used for election purposes.

Mr Stewart: It has already been done in one way or another. One of the things that we would have because public buildings of the older type — thinking of the building we all know quite well, Stormont Castle, because it is listed invariably people kick for touch and say, including architects, they cannot touch it. We know that all these things are possible, we know that it is possible if there is will to make public buildings which are usually old buildings, if there is a will to do it and we have proven this quite often by producing a scheme for them quite often in our office and giving it to them.

Mr Dodds: In terms of access for polling stations, I take it that apart from the problem of finance which is a problem for organizations such as yourself, you would have the expertise to actually carry out a survey if you were asked to do so of existing polling stations and you could also have a look at alternative sites near to existing polling stations which would maybe be better in terms of access. You could actually carry that work out if you had the finance to do so.

Mr Stewart: Yes. Access audits are two words that have dominated our thinking in the last two or three years, these are the big words today, 'access audits'. And they have been done for the University at Jordanstown and Derry and we are not fully equipped to go to the extent, of Mr Clarke's suggestion. But we would sometimes recruit people from Inst, Methody, St Malachy's, places like that were students in their final years and those people learn very fast when you train them. That is how we got part of the Belfast Trust done, and

that does not cost so much and they find that invigorating. So the answer is there are no limits to which you cannot go to satisfy that aim.

Ms Sagar: With regards to access once again we are aware that some of the buildings are extremely difficult. People do have to be helped in and you are saying that you have received numbers of complaints. Would some of those complaints also be with client care, with customer care of helping individuals into polling stations, or do they not have the difficulty in that way. We know it is difficult to move about in polling booths and many of them have to be aided, it is in regards to their age. Have you had any complaints with reference to that?

Mr Stewart: I have not personally, but we have an information office in North Street in Belfast, we have an information office in our head office and one in Dungannon. And with the best will in the world organizations do not always write their questions and their information down and their decisions. Let us imagine the answer is that there would be.

Mr McCrea: Mr Stewart, with regard to access have you had any representation of persons probably out in the countryside where in some of the country areas where it is not the matter of not being able to get a vehicle close to the door of a polling station, but in actual fact when the entrance gate is closed and only a pedestrian entrance is left, for example, Castledawson is one which has a long entrance up to the school and whether it is pouring rain no matter what is happening that gate is closed, locked with only a pedestrian entrance. Is that helpful?

Mr Stewart: No it is not, far from it, but it is just a matter of co-ordination.

Mr McCrea: But in your opinion who would give the authority or give the instruction?

Mr Stewart: Is it an area board school?

Mr McCrea: It is a controlled school.

Mr Stewart: Then it has got to be the North Eastern Board in that case. It has got to be someone in authority, with caretaking, or security. It has got to be someone like that.

Ms Sagar: How would you feel this Committee could even help yourselves, Disability Action, especially in relation to access into polling booths, also the electoral department and statutory bodies? Have you any suggestions for us or anything you feel we should be following up on your behalf in relation to polling stations at this time?

Mr Stewart: Well actually some of the thoughts offered today and some of the suggestions to me are very progressive and if anyone felt that these will be recorded as such if something comes from that and ends up in our table we will be more than willing to investigate it.

Could I say Ladies and Gentlemen in all my years of public life I have not enjoyed the satisfaction that I have experienced in the last five years in Disability Action at a considerable

reduced salary, I might tell you. But it has been extremely great because it is something that is worthwhile.

The Chairman: Well certainly on behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you for coming to us and assisting us. As you have noted there a couple of issues which we would appreciate if you would follow-up in writing and I know from firsthand you are established in Carrickfergus in the work and influence that you have had in that area and I wish you and Disability Action all the very best in the future.

Mr Stewart: Thank you very much Chairman.

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

MR H BARNES MP

...the ...

The ...

...the ...

HOUSE OF COMMONS
COMMITTEE ON INVESTIGATION

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

MR H BARNES MP

The Chairman: Mr Barnes, you were called to give evidence on 12 November 1997. You were asked to give evidence on the irregularities in the voting system in the 1997 election. You were asked to give evidence on the irregularities in the voting system in the 1997 election. You were asked to give evidence on the irregularities in the voting system in the 1997 election.

The Chairman: The evidence that you gave on 12 November 1997 was recorded in the minutes of the Committee's proceedings on that day. May I suggest that you should read the minutes of the meeting to which you were invited.

Mr Barnes: Thank you very much. I would do my best to try to respond to the questions that the Committee has asked me to answer. I will do my best to try to respond to the questions that the Committee has asked me to answer.

The Chairman: The first question that I would like to ask you is: To what extent, if any, were there any irregularities in the voting system in the 1997 election? The Chairman: The first question that I would like to ask you is: To what extent, if any, were there any irregularities in the voting system in the 1997 election?

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

MR H BARNES MP

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Thursday 24 July 1997

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE (Mr H Barnes MP)

on

ELECTORAL REFORM

The Chairman: Thank you very much for coming — you are very welcome. We as elected representatives are very concerned about the problems that were faced during the recent elections in Northern Ireland, both the Westminster and the local elections. There are irregularities in the voting system itself and problems too with access, postal votes and proxy votes and so forth. We appreciate your very deep interest in Northern Ireland and we are very grateful for your coming along to give us some of your experiences. I hope your advice and the discussion we will have will make an important contribution to the report we hope to produce.

The members of the Committee are representative of most of the political parties that were elected to the Forum. Some people are away on holiday at the moment, hence their absence. May I suggest that you tell us what you see as the main issues and then I will open the meeting to questions from the members.

Mr Barnes: Thank you very much for the invitation to be here. What I thought I would do is try to respond to the six points that were contained in the resolution that gave this Committee the brief that it has at the moment, some of which I may be able to elaborate on much more fully than others.

The first one was about removing multiple entries from the electoral register. To some extent it may be a matter of preventing multiple entries in the first place, although the question of removal is also relevant. I take the point that was made during the debate in the Forum that it should not be possible, as it is at the moment, for people's names to be down on two sets of electoral registers, and arrangements should be made to ensure that names are on one or the other and that people know that. Sometimes electoral returning officers will have some responsibility here because entries might be made, or might be carried over, for

instance, from previous registers, by electoral returning officers without the knowledge of the individuals concerned. But they will need to have some responsibility themselves.

A central checking system could, I presume, operate within Northern Ireland, given the relatively limited number of constituencies. The easiest way to check is to use identity cards. In Malta, for instance, where there are identity cards, the identity-card number appears on the electoral register against a person's registration. That might present certain other problems, but in terms of electoral registration it is very useful because it means that it is then possible to operate and check centrally to ensure that the same entry, the same ID number, has not been entered in other areas. But that may be to anticipate quite a large task, and there is the whole problem about identity cards themselves.

But the names and details that are held by electoral returning officers can presumably be checked against the records that are held by district councils, for instance. When the poll tax operated in England, Wales and Scotland district auditors encouraged an interface between the poll-tax register and the electoral register to make sure that some people were not being missed for poll-tax purposes. It was possible, although not encouraged by the Government, to operate it the other way round, to pick the numbers of people who had been missed off poll-tax registers and were added elsewhere.

Presumably some arrangements could be made to use the records that are held by councils, which would not include everybody, admittedly, in the meantime in order to do this form of central checking. I will elaborate when I am answering the next question about my argument that there should be a rolling electoral register that would allow people to be placed on registers at the place where they are at at particular times and to be deleted when they move.

One advantage of the rolling-register system, in connection with removing multiple entries or not getting multiple entries, is that if it were to delete people when they were no longer eligible to be on a register in a particular area, it would include the removal of people who had died. Information is supplied regularly to councils from the registrar of deaths, births and marriages about the number of people who have died in a previous month for housing-benefit and council-tax purposes. Now that information could be used in connection with a register that was being changed and up-dated so that the names of people who are dead were removed. That would have the advantage that political parties would not be sending material out to people who were no longer on the register and upsetting their spouses. But, in terms of misuse of electoral registers, to have that element removed would be of value.

The rolling-register system that I am going to suggest also involves in it the early issue of polling cards — and there is a great deal of publicity around the issue of polling cards — so that people could check whether they had been correctly registered or not. And it strikes me that although there are sometimes problems with the delivery of postal cards, or polling-station cards, if polling cards were issued early, and there was a great deal of publicity around it, people might actually receive polling cards that they were surprised about, polling cards with the wrong name for the particular address or with more names than there should be for that address. That would then give the opportunity for feedback to the electoral returning officer to see that those names, certainly in a rolling-register situation, were removed from the register.

The second point that was put forward by the Forum was the need to ensure that those who are entitled to vote are registered. And this is probably where the most work in this area relates to an activity that I have been involved in. Millions are certainly missing from electoral registers in the United Kingdom, and we have a registration system which is out-dated, which is more relevant to the type of society that we had in the 1950s and 1960s. In a mobile and rootless society many people find it very, very difficult to get on registers, and they may not be enthusiastic enough to get themselves on a register, but the system does not provide for this.

I have had distributed to members of the Committee two pages which were taken from material that the House of Commons Library supplied to me. The second page has a summary of England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland and the total United Kingdom figures. These are a year out-of-date, and I am currently pursuing an update of these figures to refer to the 1997 register. But the indications are, when you look at the global figures, that there is little difference between nations as far as the principles are concerned. The left-hand-column statistics give the electorate on the basis of age in 1995. The reason it is mid-year 1995 is that that is the equivalent period for checking with the 1996 register. The 1996 register in Northern Ireland started to be collated in September 1995 — in the rest of the United Kingdom it was in October. So the nearest dates that you can get together are 1995 dates, and next year they will be 1996 dates.

The figures for population, which are the age cohorts that would be eligible for the electoral registers, are only provided by districts and are not available within parliamentary constituencies. But you will see that all the districts in Northern Ireland are contained in the material that is in front of you. The next column shows the number of people who are on electoral registers, and there is a difference between the figures generally. A minus figure shows that there are far more in the eligible population cohorts than are on the register, but sometimes there are more people on the register than there are in those cohorts. The figures have to be handled carefully because the population figures contain within them people who cannot be on electoral registers. So, if someone is an overseas resident here, is not from the Republic of Ireland or from the Commonwealth, he is not entitled to be on an electoral register. But I think that the numbers in most categories in Northern Ireland would be much fewer than, say, in London constituencies where there is often a quite dramatic shortfall.

When these figures are handled carefully they give a sort of indication — and they give a better indication of overall figures for the United Kingdom, or for general areas such as Northern Ireland, than they do for specific districts. They indicate that increasing numbers of people are beginning to disappear from electoral registers, or that they have been disappearing over a period, and for the United Kingdom the difference is 4.5%, but you have to account for those overseas residents — in Northern Ireland it is 3.7%.

The general figures for the United Kingdom, particularly with the introduction of the poll tax, which you did not have here, began to falter, and we moved from about a 2.3 minus figure to 4.5 in these totals. But, generally, there has been a slippage in certain categories, and one of the categories is the attainers, those who are coming up to be on the register for the first time. I have not got the details for Northern Ireland on that, I have just drawn that from more general figures.

The figures tend to indicate that in the United Kingdom two million people are missing from the electoral registers. If you allow for those who cannot get on the registers, overseas visitors, and those in prison — that is approximately about half a million — there is a shortfall of about a million and a half according to these statistics.

That does not tell you the whole story, because, as you know, lots of people are on the registers who are not entitled to be on them. This is not first because of people fiddling, which may be the problem in Northern Ireland, but because of the date and nature of registers and the carry-over arrangements. Some people may be entered in more than one place, or they may be entered in a place where they are never going to exercise their vote and where it would be unreasonable to expect them to do so.

The best I can do is give you more statistics. The numbers liable to be missing in total are taken from a survey that was done by the Office of Population Census and Survey, but in 1991. That survey was conducted in England and Wales only. It indicates the categories of people with the greatest numbers missing. These are inner London and outer London — cities rather than rural areas; the attainers and those in the 20 - 24 age band; those who moved in the past year, because of the static nature of the register; new Commonwealth citizens — they have a very high percentage of 36.6%; and black people and those who rent private furnished and unfurnished accommodation — it is higher in furnished than in unfurnished. Who these groups are liable to be may be understandable, the more rootless in society or mobile, and the estimate in this survey was that in England and Wales the figure for those missing is between 7.4% and 9%.

When there was some dispute about my calculation on these figures within the Office of Population Census and Survey, an internal memo that was put round in 1994 by Denis Roberts, the Director of Statistics, said "Surely the estimates produced by Mr Barnes are broadly correct". So, on this basis, large numbers seem to be being missed.

My suggestion is for a rolling register for which you could use existing registers in order to start the ball rolling. But then you would add and delete as people moved into different areas. You would expect electoral returning officers to contact each other about changes that they knew had occurred, and there would be an obligation on those who held information about such movement to supply the details to electoral returning officers. So councils, educational institutions, estate agents and all sorts of people who had information about movement taking place would supply that information to the electoral returning officer.

I do not argue that they should put the names down on the register then, but they should contact the people who have moved and give them a time to fill their forms in and get on the registers. One problem is that people could be moving into an area as a by-election was taking place, for instance, and at the suggestion of the Liberal Democrats, I said that the register should stop rolling when elections were announced, although, if people had been missed from the register, there should still be a period of up to a week before the election to get on as long as they had qualified before that date, and the publicity around the polling cards would help achieve this.

I am conscious of the fact that I am talking rather a lot and have only made two points, but number 2 is probably the major point that I wish to elaborate on. Number 3 is about providing suitable and convenient polling stations —

Mr Robinson: Mr Chairman, I do not want to interrupt Mr Barnes, but I think it would be useful for us to deal with those two points and then ask him to go on. A lot of us will have some things on our mind about what he has said so far that we may want to take up. We have no difficulty about his talking — and I am happy that he should continue for as long as he needs to — but it might be more useful for the Committee if we dealt with the points that have been raised so far and which are very useful in themselves.

Mr Neeson: The whole idea of the rolling register is an important one. One of the points that you made towards the end was your suggestion of a deadline, maybe one a week before an election, for getting someone on to the electoral register. Is that practical?

Mr Barnes: The register would stop rolling once an election had been announced. This is obviously easier for by-elections and general elections. The problem with the local government elections is that you already know when they will occur, and somebody could take some action, I suppose, prior to that. We do not want a situation in which people just move in during the election period in order just to get on the register, which could help to distort results. The argument about the rolling register is that you can get on it at any time. Once you have moved into a particular area, you are entitled to be on it there — and you may be missing. The announcement of the election itself and the issue of the polling cards and the publicity around that would alert people to the fact that people were missing.

I realize that it might present you with some difficulties because there is another set of people that have to be checked quite closely. Some people argue that you should be able to do this right up to election day. The difficulties are with the electoral returning officer's being able to handle the situation. Electoral returning officers are underfunded and need considerable extra resources in order to do their work, and I just felt, in terms of practicalities, that the week before the end was as far as you could go to the wire of the election itself. Obviously information about who had been added would have to be supplied to the political parties for their canvassing purposes and to enable some surveillance of what was taking place within an area, because the registers are published for those purposes, although they are sold commercially nowadays — and that is not something I agree with — which itself may deter some people from entering their names.

Mr Robinson: I have several questions. First of all, how should we read this document, the two-page one that you have provided us with? In what circumstances is the number of electors likely to be greater than the population? You have given a number of reasons for its being likely to be less than the population.

Mr Barnes: You cannot always tell how good an electoral register is just by looking at a district's figures and comparing it with another district. Also, electoral returning officers act differently. There could well be an excessive number on any electoral register, because of a great number of carry-overs, for instance, from the previous register without their having been fully checked out.

In Northern Ireland I understand action is taken in order to canvass widely to check that they have the correct people on the register. This is certainly what the former Secretary of State said to us in the House in response to a Parliamentary Question. I do not know how accurate that is. It could be that, just on the side of caution, in order to make sure that various people are not being missed, not too vigorous action is taken to exclude people. In some other areas you might get a lot missing, because it is only the return of the forms that is being taken into account, and people may be being missed, unless careful canvassing is being done.

I think it was in the Brent area that Labour threatened legal action, because so many people were missing from the registers that the Representation of the People Act was not being fully complied with. Extra canvassing took place and thousands and thousands of people were added to the registers within those areas. You almost have to look at the practice in each of these areas, but I thought Northern Ireland's figures were very interesting in that it had areas that were at the two ends of the figures. You will see on the right-hand side that out of the 438 district authorities in the United Kingdom, it links what the position is and —

Mr Robinson: Antrim was a minus 10, and Castlereagh was a plus 5.

Mr Barnes: So of the worst 18 in the United Kingdom, you have got three. And of those that have a 5% shortfall, you have seven out of the 102 throughout the United Kingdom. Yet, in terms of the seemingly over-representational figures, you have eight out of the United Kingdom total of 28. The one that is the worst is the city of Westminster, and it may have its own peculiarities, but you have a number of areas that look quite peculiar with the figures on the register being so high. I do not know how this ties in with what you feel was going on in different areas. Any one area has to be looked at in considerable detail before we know what has happened.

Mr Robinson: You mean if it is a good area, you are likely to register there.

Mr Barnes: Well, if it is an area that has a more settled population, you are more likely to have registration taking place.

Mr Robinson: The only reason you are giving us for the numbers' being over is that the electoral register may not be up-to-date.

Mr Barnes: Yes, it has a lot of old material in it. I do not know — I have only just seen these figures and examined them — whether that would reflect any of the campaigns being engaged on by people to add extra names.

Mr Robinson: In fact, quite the reverse because the areas that are high are north Down, Ards and Castlereagh, areas in which you do not have that same community conflict. But I can see the attraction of registering in some of those places certainly. In relation to the multiple entries, is it practical to constitute an offence of multiple entry as opposed to one of multiple voting?

Mr Barnes: It would have to be very carefully constructed because in some cases the multiple entry might not be the fault of the person concerned. Some blame might rest with the registrar. The registrar might have some difficulty checking maybe because of a lack of

resources to do the job. So any legislation that placed a duty upon the voter to ensure that he was only registered in one place would have to have various get-out provisions in it.

Mr Ford: Like Mr Robinson, I find some difficulty reading those Northern Ireland statistics, particularly when I take, for example, Castlereagh and Newtownabbey which have identical communities on either side of the city, and Antrim is not that dissimilar. I was trying to remember the statistics I forgot years ago. The final bit of the note basically says that there are problems in getting detailed Northern Ireland figures disaggregated by age. I wonder whether we should give too much credence to the Northern Ireland section on that basis. Maybe we simply do not have accurate enough statistics, but they certainly seem to contradict entirely the feeling that we have in this Committee about the areas in which multiple registrations occur.

You said right at the beginning that you thought there should be no multiple registrations. Do you mean absolutely no multiple registrations? I have a nephew who is studying in Portsmouth who quite legitimately last October registered himself to vote in Portsmouth while his father was also quite legitimately filling him in on the form for the register at home. Is it necessary to cut out that which I would see as legitimate double-registration as opposed to the examples that we saw on that television programme of people registering three or four times in one city in clear attempts to be fraudulent?

Mr Barnes: My attitude may be influenced by the fact that I pushed the notion of the rolling register. If there were a rolling register, there would be no reason for anyone to be registered in more than one place. In some cases, because people move between areas, a decision might have to be taken about the residence. And again, the poll-tax legislation in Britain operated on that basis. It said that what was your sole or main place of residence would determine which council you paid your poll-tax moneys to. So a decision has to be made about sole or main place of residence, which can be changed with a rolling system that has flexibility in it, but you could only go for one particular place at a time. Students might reasonably argue that the place where they were studying was their main residence, and they would be on that register working out that elections would be more likely to take place when they were there and that that would be handier for them than elsewhere.

But then if they had a reason for spending more time at home, as it were, or they ended their stay at college, they could very quickly be transferred to the new area. But we are not operating under a rolling register, I grant, and there may be some difficulties with that. Ours is a system that is currently open to abuse, but maybe no more wider abuse than normal.

Mr Ford: On the timing of things, at the moment we cannot take an application for a postal vote 11 days from polling day or whenever is declared to be the cut-off time, or five days for a late sickness. I just cannot see how the week cut-off that you talked about could be made workable without a massive increase in resources. You would also need to give the parties resources if they were to campaign effectively on something which could change up until the week before polling day.

Mr Barnes: Well, it would be very unlikely for someone who had managed to get himself on to a rolling register, after being excluded, before the election date to be in need of a postal or proxy vote. The issue of disability and access to polling stations maybe arises

with this, but you are talking about somebody who is within the area concerned, has been missed off, but who should now be able to get to that polling station. In fact, an advantage of a rolling register is it should cut out the need in many cases for postal-vote provision, except, I grant, those other postal-case arguments for people with medical problems or who are going on holiday. This would be an added difficulty and might push people in those areas to try to organize proxy voting at that stage, although generally I am not very much in favour of extending the provision on proxy voting because I think that it is more open to abuse than postal voting is.

Mr Stoker: With regard to the rolling register, you are talking about a multi-agency collection point for information. Would it not be a lot simpler to link the rolling register to national insurance numbers? If you were on a register, you would have to transfer your national insurance number to wherever you were going to go. That would probably be the easiest way to provide proof of where you live, or where you claim benefit, or where you work or whatever.

Mr Barnes: I agree, and that is the type of point I raised as well about the avenues down which we could go to do this. You need some other areas as well as fall-back checks, because the national-insurance number would not operate as readily and easily, I would have thought, as an identity-card system, except we do not have identity cards, and all sorts of civil liberties problems are associated with them.

Mr Stoker: Would you actually be in favour of a voting identity card rather than a national identity card?

Mr Barnes: I am not unhappy about the notion of identity cards generally and a voting identity card would seem to be a fruitful provision. I know you have had a lot of discussion on whether a photograph should be available and while a passport or a driving licence does have a photograph, there are many people who just do not have a photograph on an official document. With a voting-card system, some method would be needed to verify the photograph. When we order a passport initially we have a signature on the back to verify it, and a photograph that was stamped and verified by some authority might be possible, short of a voting card.

Ms Sagar: How would the rolling system that you have mentioned be co-ordinated? How would you get the existing records to the councils et cetera for them to update? How would you ensure that they did it correctly? Also involved in that is the cost. You have already mentioned resources. Where would the resources come from and do you have an idea of the cost of this type of system?

Mr Barnes: It was suggested by a Minister on one occasion that it would cost about £4 million, but that does not seem to me to be an excessive amount of money if you are talking about democratic arrangements. Sorry what was the earlier question again?

Ms Sagar: The earlier question was how do you get these councils or whatever to communicate with each other? Who is going to co-ordinate it and who is going to be responsible for it?

Mr Barnes: There is a suggestion by some that an electoral commission should be established that would operate things centrally and have wide-ranging responsibilities which could, presumably, operate that type of provision. Short of that, you could still place a duty upon electoral returning officers. When they had the information, which many would readily have supplied to them, that they were clearing people off their registers, they would transfer that information to other electoral returning officers who would then have the obligation to get a form out to an individual and check to see that everything was being done to try to get that person on the register.

The Chairman: To come back to the matter of the printed register, you seem to be not dismissive but, because of the nature of the rolling register, you do not seem to see the same necessity for the printed register. Am I right in saying that?

Mr Barnes: No, I realize that the printed register has value attached to it because it is made available for the political parties in particular to use for both their political purposes — canvassing and to check that everything is in order in connection with it. They sometimes do the canvassing, as it were, in order to get people to fill forms in to register themselves and to check on who should legitimately be involved. So I still argue for the annual publication as a snapshot of the register. As we do not have identity cards I argue that the registration forms should still be done each year as a further check on this and also that the registers should be published when an election is announced so that people can see how it is at that late stage. I grant that there is the problem then of the bits and pieces that could be added during the campaign itself, but that information could also be made available.

In an age of computers it should be quite possible for people to check to see that they are on registers through the use of modern technology. Many people are resentful of the fact that when they go to a post office or somewhere to check their name out, other people can go as well and check at the same time. I am not saying that we should stop this material being publicly available, but I do feel that where it is the more readily available, an individual needs the opportunity to check that he is on the register rather than to check who else is. It is people maybe who are mobilizing for that wider checking.

The Chairman: May we move on to the other issues please.

Mr Barnes: The third point that you had was about providing suitable and convenient polling stations. This is the area I am probably thinnest on. It seems important to me for political parties, candidates and others to make representations to returning officers. It may be that guidelines issued — in the case of England and Wales by the Home Office — by the Northern Ireland Office encouraging returning officers to engage in best practice is what could be done in that area.

I do accept the point that was made in discussions that sometimes the divide that exists in Northern Ireland causes some people to feel uncomfortable about the positioning of a polling station they are using, and efforts may be needed on that. The nature of the polling station would then become important because if you put temporary polling stations in areas, you can get problems with access for disabled people, which is another matter that you were discussing.

The fourth question was about overcoming postal and proxy vote abuse. I did suggest that the rolling register might lessen the need for postal and proxy votes because it would be up-to-date and, apart from specific medical and other cases, there would be no need to have proxy-and-postal-vote provision. That does not affect Northern Ireland so much as there were only about 95 people involved. I am opposed to overseas registration of voters. I do not think we should have a compulsory register and a voluntary register attached to it, and when people go overseas and settle, they become part of that overseas society, and we certainly should not have a 20-year period allowing their registration as we have at the moment. I do not know whether that creates any problems in Northern Ireland, but I notice that there has never been any great success in getting hold of overseas voters, and the numbers are very, very limited as far as Northern Ireland is concerned.

The fifth point was about preventing voting personation by introducing proper and effective identity checks. We have discussed this to some extent but identity cards, certified photographs or a voting card might be fruitful avenues — otherwise not everybody will be covered. There may be a bit of a problem in that carrying around cards with photographs on them or bank cards is much more a middle-class sort of thing than a working-class one, and there may be some to whom it would not come readily. They might not carry their cards around with them, as it were, and might not have them on the appropriate occasion. It is not a matter of people's ability to do things, it is a matter of their lifestyles. But if you have a serious problem, it may be that action of that type needs to be taken.

The sixth point considered other relevant issues. Some of my own campaigning, as with the rolling register, is to do with registration of homeless people. The law at the moment says that you have to be a resident in order to be registered. It does not define what a resident is. A resident is normally somebody who is expected to have a residence, and that, by definition, almost excludes homeless people.

There have been occasions when people have been placed on registers by authorities, or have even won court cases and been allowed to use an accommodation address as their address in a particular area. I would like to see the definition changing to allow homeless people to be added or, in the meantime, the appropriate Government office putting out circulars to encourage a more liberal interpretation of the present arrangement.

I can see that there might be some difficulties in Northern Ireland because that could give rise to the potential abuse that you have to be quite careful about. Some people might ask whether a person was genuinely homeless, whether this was the correct person whose name had been put down, but I do not think that would be insurmountable.

If we had a rolling register with the homeless on it, we would still have a problem with disabled people. I always believe that disabled people should have the same ability to exercise their franchise as able-bodied people, and they should not be driven to having to pick up proxy or postal votes. Many wish to exercise their right in person. There is a survey, which unfortunately did not cover Northern Ireland, called 'Polls Apart' by SCOPE. It has just been published and deals with the problems in polling stations. It was conducted throughout Britain, but not in Northern Ireland, and it says that only 6% of the polling stations surveyed were fully accessible. They surveyed 900 polling stations in England and Wales. In Scotland there were over a 1,000, and 94% of polling stations had one or more

access problems that would render them inaccessible to a disabled person wishing to vote independently — only 20% of polling stations have temporary ramps. There is a massive problem with access to polling stations.

I know that there has always been quite solid support in Northern Ireland, right across the political parties, for full civil rights for disabled people. I was lucky with a Private Member's Bill to run the Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill, and I added to it a clause that had been in my Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill on rolling registers. This Bill also dealt with access to polling stations for disabled people, so work has been done that can be picked up and run with on how these things should be done. I think this is quite important. In fact, when I was pursuing the Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill, I also re-introduced a 10-minute-rule Bill on rolling registers.

I always went for cross-party support to sponsor the Bill, and I got people from all political parties involved, especially during the Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill. The four political parties represented in the Commons from Northern Ireland supported that particular measure. I also wrote at the same time to all political parties which were not represented, and I think I got support from just about everybody we contacted apart from Sinn Fein, who were presumably embarrassed at the issue of disability given the amount created on occasions by the IRA.

The Chairman: Would it be possible for the Committee to have a copy of your Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill and also the publication 'Polls Apart'? Would that be of any assistance to the Committee when dealing with the matter of access for the disabled?

Mr Barnes: Yes, I believe so. I think it is the second report they produced. They produced one to do with the 1992 election, and one with this last general election, which was on a wider basis than the other one, and they only released it last week. Given your interests and the views that have been expressed earlier, I can provide you with a copy.

Ms Purvis: Mr Barnes, I was wondering if there was any provision in the survey 'Polls Apart' for people with learning disabilities. Do you know of any surveys or statements or anything to do with people with learning disabilities having access to information on voting and things like that?

Mr Barnes: Yes, there has always been concern on the parts of those who press for access to polling stations by disabled people not just to discuss the matter of the physical access, but also the electoral materials that are used. The material has to be able to be fully understood.

There is an organization for people with learning difficulties that operates from London called People First. They actually produced material accessible to people with learning difficulties and produced the first version of a bit of parliamentary legislation, my Civil Rights (Disabled Persons) Bill. We have always tried to incorporate that concern. In some ways it has been easier to deal with the general provisions for access for disabled people in employment than with polling stations, but it is possible to put into legislation requirements for people with learning difficulties to be helped to a position where they can understand what is taking place. Of course, there is a great onus on the political parties as

well, and perhaps duties should be placed upon them to produce material in such a way that people with learning difficulties can understand it. The best way for that to be done is to work in association with organizations that represent the interests of such people and are made up of people who are knowledgeable in those areas.

There is also an extra problem. Disability is not, of course, just wheelchair disability, there are many different types of disability. One disability is poor sight — what does a ballot paper look like? I know that all the ballot papers in North East Derbyshire for the general election were quite small things that must have very, very difficult for a person with bad eyesight to read. A Bill has been brought forward in the Commons by a Liberal Democrat MP who is trying to deal with that.

Mr Robinson: Taking your suggestion of a rolling register a step further and bringing it into the area of postal votes, is the same concept not valid in relation to postal votes? Should you not have a cut-off point when the election is announced and only allow people in emergency circumstances, if they can justify the reason for their not being on the continuous list, to come on?

An example, by way of a backcloth, against which you might answer the question, is a conversation I had with Pat Bradley about postal voting. He indicated, for instance, that Fermanagh and South Tyrone's continuous postal-vote list has something like 700 people on it but that number of postal votes issued was almost 5,000. There is very bad health around the Fermanagh and South Tyrone area, it appears. He says it is impossible for his staff to make a check on 4,000 new applications in a period of a week or two.

Now, would your rolling register in postal-vote circumstances overcome that kind of difficulty?

Mr Barnes: I do not think so, because the problem is that there are genuine people who do take ill or have to go suddenly somewhere in an emergency and quickly require postal-vote provision. I realize that these things would have to be weighed against each other.

The problem is that with any sort of system that is there for people to use properly and correctly it is very difficult to devise arrangements that stop its being open to abuse. It is not a problem that exists as far as the rest of the United Kingdom is concerned. It is a particular problem with yourselves, and I realize that difficulty. I myself would be a bit reluctant to go down that pathway and restrict what might quite genuinely be needed.

Although I do think that we are becoming a bit too liberal in connection with postal-and-proxy-vote facilities, the areas have been extended, and, as I said, I think that proxy votes are particularly open to abuse, but you are giving me examples of abuse of the postal-vote system as well.

Ms Purvis: Mr Barnes, can you see anyway round what Mr Robinson has suggested?

Mr Barnes: Eternal vigilance is the way around. One problem that was revealed in connection with what was said was that the returning officers just could not handle the situation.

Returning officers should be given the resources and facilities to enable them to do that. The basic building block of the democratic system is the right to vote: to be included on the register and actually have the opportunity to vote, and that certainly does not mean finding that your vote has been cancelled by someone who has been manipulating the system elsewhere.

So, we should be willing to see that the system is financed fully and properly, and there may be a special case, given Northern Ireland's particular difficulties, for saying that funds should be directed for that purpose. If you argue on the grounds that this is how a democracy functions correctly, then you have got a lot going for you — even with Governments that are not willing to introduce any taxation of an income-tax nature in order to get resources and might feel that this is a policy which is strongly controlled by the Treasury. Nevertheless, these amounts, relative to their particular importance, are not significant amounts.

Ms Purvis: If a deputy returning officer were to receive 5,000 postal-vote applications in a week, what do you suggest would be the best way for him check those applications, presuming that the resources were available?

Mr Barnes: Well, if the resources were available, there are the grounds upon which the applications have come in. If the grounds are medical grounds, how well are they substantiated by medical practitioners? If that is what has occurred, has a whole host come from certain GPs within an area? Does that look plausible in the circumstances? Is it that whole groups are now suddenly taking their holidays during a period when they did not do so before and, if that is the case, can they actually be discovered in the area at the time? And you are then going to have to have a situation in which something is done with the vote that has been exercised.

In some cases if people turn up at polling stations and find that somebody has exercised a vote on their behalf, they could still exercise a vote that would be kept separately and would only come into consideration if there were a narrow vote, a dispute about the numbers. So I suppose you could try to operate on the principle that these votes would not be allowed, but could be used on appeal by their having been kept separate.

Mr Morrow: I come from one of the constituencies where there is massive postal voting, and postal voting is imposed on people. There are people who get postal votes who never applied for them. Is there no system that can be devised to protect a person. If I get a postal vote imposed on me for which I did not apply, surely I must have some redress to say "Look, I did not apply for that, I do not want it." and return it. At the moment we cannot do that.

Mr Barnes: I would have thought that once somebody had been registered for a postal vote he should be informed of his having been registered as a postal voter. But would that be seen as being very significant at that stage by the individual concerned? Most people

take account of what is going on with elections only when elections are actually called. It should be possible to devise a system whereby if someone has acquired a postal vote illegitimately or legitimately, he can decide that that postal vote is no longer required but that what he wants to do is exercise his franchise in person. The person may have — and we were talking about the disabled area — because of the serious nature of his disability, gone for a postal vote, but then his condition improves, and he wants to exercise his franchise in the same way as other people, and it should be possible to do that if the postal vote has not been exercised.

There is no reason for the registers that are being checked by the polling clerks not being marked to show the people who have a postal vote but who have not actually registered it. If the vote has not been used, the person can be allowed to go to the polling station.

Mr Stoker: Do you think it should be made compulsory to register to vote?

Mr Barnes: The nearest I would come would be to do a bit more about making it compulsory to be on the register. Now you would still have the right to abstain even if that were compulsory because you could still decide not to put any crosses on the paper or to cross everything out in connection with it. But I think that politicians should have some responsibility for getting people to turn up and for seeking to enthuse them. We may be guilty of not always enthusing people. There was quite a low turnout in the last United Kingdom election. Now that may be a matter of the way politics are directed, and especially towards the numbers of young people, those people often being absent.

I certainly feel that trying to create a sense of civic duty about voting is quite an important thing to do, but I do not want people to feel martyrs because they have been driven to the polling station.

Mr Stoker: I do not mean making it compulsory to vote, but to register.

Mr Barnes: Sorry. I misunderstood what you said. As I said, I am much nearer the situation where there is greater pressure for people to be on registers. It is already compulsory to register and you can be fined £1,000 for not registering, but no big, heavy-handed pressure is used; it is only used in various odd occasions, but that is a point that can be argued.

There is one area in which it could be made a bit more compulsory. Should the registrar in operating a rolling register be able to put people's names directly on the register when they know they are there? Now I compromise with putting pressure on and giving an opportunity to people to fill the forms in a short period after they move into an area. But I do feel that there should be full and proper registration. It is assumed, to some extent, that we have a universal franchise. We have been through all the battles with the Chartists and the suffragettes and the extension of the franchise, and it is as if every battle has been won and that is the end of it. Now I am not saying that something dramatic has suddenly occurred and everything has all been turned upside down, but it has been nibbled away at the edges and, therefore, we need to be vigilant about it.

The problem is that it is difficult to get people to pay attention to the issue. People will talk about proportional representation and fancy franchises, and I always say "Well, why are you doing that? If you want PR, OK, but having one person, one vote, one value should mean everybody being registered in order to exercise that one vote." It is a matter of getting registration to be the key issue that people pursue, and if it were a key issue, to some extent the notion of compulsion about it would not be as great. But it is very, very difficult to raise it and, therefore, I am disposed to try to put some considerable pressure on in order to see that people actually begin to be placed upon registers, although I realize that there are various civil-liberties problems. There are people who are minority individuals in society who have arguments against registration. They do not want to be on a public register that is seen by their neighbours or sold to commercial avenues, and there are some who, mistakenly, do not want anything to do with the political game and get out of it. I argue with them that they cannot even record their abstention if they are not on the register and, therefore, that they should be on it.

Mr Morrow: The danger with enforced registration is that you then go down the road of enforced postal voting, and it is no secret that those who do not vote are carefully monitored down the years, and that is exactly what happened in the last election. The votes of those who did not vote were used by others.

The Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr Barnes, your contribution has been very helpful and the whole idea of the rolling register is something that personally attracts me. Obviously resources would be an important issue. On behalf of the Committee, once again, I would like to thank you for giving your time to come over.

Just one final thing, while the oral presentation has been excellent, is there anything in writing about your proposals for a rolling electoral register?

Mr Barnes: I could certainly put together bits of material that I have written on occasions, and I did pursue this as a Private Member's Bill in the Commons. There is also a full Friday's debate about that as well as 10-minute-rule Bills and other material. I could arrange for that to be put together. Also, I am involved in a group that is called Full Franchise and although I am just a member of it and do not hold officer position in it, it argues for a rolling register, registration for the homeless and access for disabled people, so it is my campaigning areas that it argues about, and I can see that the material that is produced is available for the Committee.

The Chairman: That would be very much appreciated, and once again thank you very much for coming along.

Mr Barnes: Thank you very much for inviting me. I have an interest in Northern Ireland, and I have an interest in electoral registers so I am pleased that you called me here. I suddenly think that I have not paid enough attention to electoral registers in Northern Ireland in spite of my two interests, so I hope it has stimulated me to various form of action.

The meeting was suspended at 12.27 pm.

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM
FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Thursday 25 September 1997

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE
(Mr W Ross MP)

ELECTORAL REFORM

Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr Ross, for giving up so much of your valuable time in coming to meet at the Committee. Your views will be known to you. I am sure you are very

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

and you are aware we are looking for views from all members of the Northern Ireland and its constituent parts. We would like to hear from all political parties including the Ulster Unionist Party and the DUP. We would also appreciate the copies that you provided ahead of the submission. Moreover you have made your presentation we hope to use you opinions about some of the main issues.

**MR W ROSS MP
(ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY)**

Mr Ross: Thank you for your welcome.

May I also say that I read the report of the Commission which was laid to the Forum at the end of last year, and I found it to be quite interesting. The way I have been involved with this particular job, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I do not too sure. I assume it was because I put my teeth as a worker on the ground in what is now the East Londonderry constituency, what at that time was the old Mid Down constituency for the Northern Ireland Parliament, and I became fairly familiar with the problems that can arise with these issues.

May I say right away that perception is not necessarily between the two major communities in Northern Ireland. In my experience, it is very often within these communities that some of the most serious issues take place. I do not have copies of my presentation available to you either, but unfortunately, I was late in making my submission and, as a result, the final version was not ready and last night.

As you can see, I have tried to cover the ground under the different headings, there being the availability of the shared electoral system, the parties of parties, the introduction of the register of electors, multiple registrations, postal-voting issues and polling day provisions, which in some ways is the most serious. It does seem to me that there are a

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

MIR W ROSS MP

(ULSTER UNIONIST PARTY)

NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Thursday 25 September 1997

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE (Mr W Ross MP)

on

ELECTORAL REFORM

The Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr Ross, for giving up so much of your valuable time in coming to speak to the Committee, most of whom will be known to you, I am sure. You are very welcome.

As you are aware we are looking at the complete electoral process in Northern Ireland and its irregularities. We will be looking at other issues as well, which we believe are creating problems for the electorate. I am pleased that you are representing the Ulster Unionist Party this morning, and we look forward to your submission. We also appreciate the copies that you provided ahead of this deliberation. Whenever you have made your presentation we hope to ask you questions about some of the points raised.

Mr Ross: Thank you for your welcome.

May I also say that I read the record of the debate which was held in the Forum in June of this year, and I found it to be quite interesting. But why I have been landed with this particular job, on behalf of the Ulster Unionist Party, I am not too sure. I assume it was because I cut my teeth as a worker on the ground in what is now the East Londonderry constituency, what at that time was the old Mid-Derry constituency for the Northern Ireland Parliament, and I became fairly familiar with the problems that can arise with personation.

May I say right away that personation is not necessarily between the two major communities in Northern Ireland. In my experience, it is very often within those communities that some of the most vicious battles take place. I did try to make copies of my presentation available to you earlier, but, unfortunately, I ran into car trouble yesterday and, as a result, the final version was not ready until last night.

As you can see, I have tried to cover the ground under six different headings, these being the availability of the marked electoral registers; the names of parties; the compilation of the register of electors; multiple registrations; postal/proxy votes; and polling day personation, which in some ways is the most serious. It does seem to me that there are a

number of areas which arise from my own experience. There are a number of areas where manipulation, irregularities, intimidation and fraud of the electoral process can be practiced, and I have listed them under those half-dozen headings which you can see on the first page of the copies with which you have been provided.

The availability of marked electoral registers, which you can now purchase from the electoral officer, is a comparatively recent innovation. Previously, the parties had to rely on their own workers in the polling stations to have marked registers for perusal later. Of course, at certain points in the count process, we could also ask for a list of the number of votes cast, and the percentage cast in each box, although not all parties availed of this because all it did was to indicate, in general terms, where the low or high turn outs were being experienced. High turn outs, in my view, are always something to which any party should give particular attention. I find it difficult in the extreme to understand how you can honestly get a turn out of over 90% of the electorate. This is because registers are usually delayed by at least six months before they are published, and in that period of time quite a large number of people will have died or moved away, and others will be ill and simply cannot turn out to vote. And, of course, there will be a number of people in every part of the province who will not, under any circumstances, cast their votes for religious reasons. Indeed, in some cases people will not cast their votes for political reasons because they do not wish to give any recognition whatsoever to the society in which they live.

Of course, whenever we get these marked electoral registers every party finds them extremely useful, because then you know who voted and who did not. My concern is not with constitutional parties getting a hold of the marked registers, but rather with those of a more violent disposition who then visit individuals. In my own area we had one case where a known Republican group visited a housing estate, and it was surprising how the number of people turning out from that estate rose in the last two or three hours of that day's polling. The individuals, of course, who told these stories to our Unionist party workers, are most unwilling to expose themselves to the odium, and to the possible retaliation, which would be the consequence of them going public after having been visited.

This, of course, is one of the difficulties, and perhaps the greatest difficulty, which one encounters when determining the extent of fraudulent voting: much of the information is hearsay. But it is so widespread, it is so often repeated, and it comes from sources which we know to be reliable, that we cannot ignore it. However, in my view, we cannot prove to the satisfaction of a court of law that massive intimidation and massive electoral malpractice exists. It is a suspicion which we have. In fact, more than that, it is a certainty. But, as I say, it cannot be proved.

This provision of a marked electoral register, while being very useful to legitimate parties in trying to get their electorate out, has led to a problem: it is equally useful to those who wish to practice intimidation on those whom they perceive to be their natural supporters but who are not necessarily their natural supporters.

Secondly, the Committee will be aware that practically all of the parties that have been intent on maintaining a constitutional link between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom use the term "Unionist" in some part of their name. The mere fact that this is so proves that all organized political groups in the Unionist community are well seized of

that term's emotional pulling power. They know that it is absolutely fundamental to the Unionist community that they are seen to be Unionists.

Strangely, those of an Irish Nationalist persuasion in our community do not have a single term which has the same pulling power. The word "Republican", as you know, has been used in a variety of ways over this last 100 years or more. We also have terms like "socialist" and "Labour" because some people seem to believe that that has a pulling power. But there does not seem to be a single term which can be applied throughout the Nationalist community to bring them out, and which makes clear to their electorate that they are part of that particular grouping.

We in the Unionist Party, as you will all be aware, have had considerable difficulties with this, not just recently but going on for 100 years. For instance, candidates who were selected by the local Unionist branch for local government were often opposed by "unofficial Unionists" — those who were not selected through the party but who still called themselves Unionist in some form or another. We had then to label our candidate as the "Official Unionist", which was really shorthand for the officially selected Unionist candidate. And that was done to such an extent that, in the past, commentators and other parties have frequently, and inaccurately, referred to my party as the Official Unionist Party.

Now, in my view, these are strategies which mislead electors to some extent, and they have certainly been used in that way in the past. But it is not something which has been confined to Northern Ireland. We had a very interesting battle in Britain, in the South-West as I recall, when an individual stood as a "Literal Democrat" which was quite obviously a play on "Liberal Democrat". There was a most horrendous row about it, especially since his intervention probably had an effect on the Liberal Democrat's candidate failure to win the seat.

I have been called to meetings of the Home Office's Working Party on electoral matters in Great Britain which meets at irregular intervals. I think that every party represented here will have received an invitation to that at some time or another. I think that all, or at least most of the parties, will have attended, or will have had representatives there, and, if I may say so it is a very interesting process.

We have looked, over a long period, at various ways of avoiding the use of confusing names for parties and how we could actually tie a name to a particular political grouping. But there is no easy answer to that. Firstly, it was thought that parties might be allowed to copyright their name, or to copyright their logo as a trademark. But there are legal difficulties with that, as a trademark apparently demands that there be a service, or a product, arising from the use of that trademark. We also thought that it might have been possible to make it an offence to mislead electors by using a confusing name, but that has been rejected on the grounds that it could draw electoral officers into political controversy.

We looked at the possibilities of increasing the number of assenters required, of increasing the deposit, and of increasing the percentage of votes needed to save the deposit. But where you have someone like James Goldsmith, money does not matter. Also, were we to increase the percentage of votes needed to save the deposit, or the number of assenters required, we were forced to the conclusion, by what we were told, that this would restrict the

capacity of any individual to stand for election, and that is not considered acceptable in our democracy.

We thought of publishing a draft list of parties and persons standing, with the names of the parties and a description of the candidates. Now, this would have given established parties an opportunity to object to a name chosen by a newcomer or a spoiler. It could also, however, have meant court action, and that would almost certainly have increased the election timetable by anything up to seven days. So, unless that increase in time had been universal, it could have meant that the election would have been held in one constituency on one day and on a different day in another. Of course, the same thing would happen with local government elections as well, and, for a whole variety of reasons that was not considered to be an acceptable extension of the process. There is no easy answer to that particular question and the officials are still looking at it. However, it is like looking for the Holy Grail and I do not know that there is an answer. It is up to the parties to get their identity across to the electorate.

Let us return to the issue of the fraudulent acquisition of votes and, in particular, point number three: the compilation of the electoral register. It is very important to understand that any party or grouping which is intent on electoral fraud probably has to begin its operation a very long time before the election is called. It has to begin with the compilation of the electoral register because there are certain dates by which you must be resident before you can be on the register. In an effort to combat fraud at this stage, the first priority has to be the information that is sought on the household form. This form needs to be reviewed and revised and should provide more detail, especially with regard to people who are working away from home. This relates mainly to students of various types whose term-time addresses should be included. The length of the course of education or training should also be included so that the electoral officer would have on record — and he can do this quite easily by computer — when the course is due to be completed.

The situation is simpler in Northern Ireland than it is in Great Britain. In Northern Ireland the qualifying date is 15 September; in Great Britain it is 10 October. By 10 October university students are all back at university; here they are not. Here, in nearly all cases, they should be registered at home. In Great Britain they could quite easily be registered, willingly or unwillingly, at their term-time address or their home address, or, indeed, at both. There has to be extremely careful vetting by the electoral office when students are claiming votes. When a new claim is made — and I am thinking here not only of students, but of people who are moving house — there needs to be some method of checking against the former address. Under the continuous registration process which we have enjoyed for some years, claimants should have to sign the claim form. And I would prefer it if they also turned up at the electoral inquiry as I shall discuss later.

We cannot leave all of this in the hands of the electoral officer. The cost of carrying this out, with assiduous attention to detail, would be prohibitive. In the past, the province's political parties paid the most attention to the detail of this but that has diminished over the last 20 or 25 years since I was involved.

The constitutional parties should pay close attention to the electoral register. They should object to people whom they feel should not be on it. They should also have their

representatives attend the hearing so that they can question more closely the inclusion of a name. I did this for many years; there has to be a certain amount of expertise acquired but it is useful expertise. In large urban concentrations it is very difficult to know who is supposed to be living where and whether or not they are actually there. There are also difficulties caused by individuals whose inclusion on the electoral register has been objected to but who do not attend electoral inquiries themselves. Instead, they leave it to a representative of a political party to defend their inclusion. Often, however, I found that asking questions was, in itself, sufficient to remove a false name from the register or to determine the existence or the whereabouts of an individual.

My fourth point concerns multiple registrations and we need to divide that into two separate categories. The first is where there are many people registered at one address. That should always lead to questions but in some cases you will find it could be student accommodation or a hostel or even an old people's home. I got into hot water during the last election when we ran address labels through the computer: the register had a mistake in it and it did not stop at the end of the old people's home and reinstalled the former name of the road whereupon the other residents of the road — a couple of hundred — were told that they were living in the local geriatric home. It did not go down well. These are genuine cases and they are, no doubt, known to the electoral registration officers. However, great care should be taken when a number of people are registered at a single, private house. Such cases need to be closely investigated and that really means an electoral officer calling at that dwelling.

The second category relates to those who are registered at a number of addresses. The most innocent of these are students who can, quite legitimately sometimes, or by chance, be registered both at home and at their college. Students may be registered here and in Great Britain and students in Great Britain may be registered at home and at their university. There are also situations where individuals who are not students are registered at more than one address. I did this sort of work for the party in my area before I entered Parliament and it was clear then that there was a number of people who were, quite innocently, registered at more than one address because they had moved house and their name had not been taken off their old address. Once detected, such oversights are easily rectified. However, it should not happen nowadays when the electoral officer is supposed to be looking after it himself. It can only happen on a large scale where there is a deliberate attempt by the elector or by a political party or grouping to practise fraud.

The Committee should note that such multiple registration by an individual can take place in more than one ward or even in more than one constituency. The electoral officers could only detect this practice if each elector had an identification mark attached to his name. Such an identification mark should not necessarily be printed in the electoral register, but it should certainly be held in the computer. The identification mark could be a person's medical or national insurance number or his date of birth. I, personally, prefer the national insurance number because not only is it permanent, it is unique to each individual throughout his life. If this were done, a computer programme could very easily throw up such multiple registrations before the electoral register was published and we would have an accurate register. I do not think the register can be 100% accurate at present.

The Committee will also be aware that there are a number of people on the electoral register who live outside the United Kingdom — the overseas electors. They are relatively

few in number and the electoral officer is aware of their existence and who they are. However, he needs to keep a very careful eye to see that this facility is not abused. Personally, I am not very happy with it. If people move out of the country they should lose the right to vote. That is a personal view — the law says otherwise.

We also have a number of people who apply for postal or proxy votes who are registered in Northern Ireland but living in Great Britain. Such people may be university students or people who have moved during the currency of a register. The electoral officer needs to exercise great care in dealing with such applications but I will say more about that when I speak about postal and proxy voting.

The dangers that are inherent in all these things can only be combated by the electoral officer's staff and the constitutional parties giving assiduous attention to the register. I repeat that time and time again. We cannot leave it to the electoral officer alone — the parties themselves have to take a keen interest in this.

The whole question of postal and proxy votes is one that has concerned me for very many years and I have often been in touch with the Chief Electoral Officer, Mr Bradley. Again, there are no easy answers. The Committee will be aware that Mr Bradley opened a postal vote centre for two and a half months before the elections this year in an effort to allow people to get their postal and proxy votes sorted out. That reflects his concern that all those who are entitled to a postal or proxy vote should obtain one. I have a difficulty with it because it was centralized and that removed the local knowledge which is absolutely essential. Such a centre should be tied to the local office as well as to the central office in Belfast. However, the retention of the postal and proxy vote system is absolutely vital to ensure that the maximum number of genuine people have the opportunity to cast their vote. But it is equally vital that the system should be free of fraud.

My experience over the years has been that many young people are very wary of having postal ballot papers sent to them at university, in particular, to halls of residence or to houses which are occupied by more than one. This is because there can be a group of students there who do not all share the same political allegiance and it is quite easy to spot the postal or proxy vote papers when they arrive. In such circumstances, students are certain that their relatives will cast their votes as they desire and so they seek a proxy. However, there have been allegations that, on some occasions, someone other than the elector has applied for a proxy vote and this has been granted. This is made easier by the ability to see the marked register. You do not proxy for folk who vote at every election, you proxy for those who do not vote: you apply for postal votes for those who do not vote. The marked register is a great source of information to those who are attempting fraud. In order to avoid this sort of fraud, the granting of a proxy application should be confirmed in writing to the applicant. If the application has been granted some time before the election then it should be confirmed to the applicant whenever the election is called. If this were done, any fraud would be rapidly detected if the elector wished to avoid it and the electoral officer could take action to ensure that the false ballot paper was not cast.

There are many people who require a postal vote at elections. They may be elderly, they may have been unwell for some time or they may have taken ill suddenly. These, and those who have long-term illnesses or are frail, apply to be placed on the standing list. They

can do that at any time. Despite this facility, many people do not apply early. As a result, when an election is called all political parties are overwhelmed with demands for postal votes.

This gives rise to a number of difficulties. Firstly, the application form is confusing to electors. An enormous number of them are turned down every time. They have been filled in by the ordinary elector who has been confused by it. The electoral officer says it is perfectly easy. He is dealing with it every day but the ordinary citizen only comes across these forms once every five years, maybe less often. Thus they may make a mistake and, as a result, they do not get their vote. I am certain that many genuine applications are refused because the form has not been filled in properly.

It is also the case that many people come to the local representative of the party they support to have the form filled in. We are all familiar with this. When this happens it is filled in properly but then you run up against the problem that there is a restriction on the number of forms which one can witness. That increases the difficulty of the genuine applicant and they go off to someone else who makes a mess of it. However, those who practise fraud are organized and ensure that they have sufficient people available to fill in and sign such forms. That matter has to be looked at very carefully because a person signing a number of forms as a witness is generally a party worker. Such a person would almost certainly be known to the Deputy Electoral Officer and, in the case of the established parties, could be easily contacted if a problem arose. If such party workers became involved in fraud, then, of course, the consequences would be very serious. Few, if any, of the constitutional parties would risk it.

A further safeguard could be a second signature of, say, a JP or someone of similar standing in the community. We already have double signatures on some applications, but the whole system has to be looked at again. It is an unfortunate fact that if an application is refused for any reason — and very often it is just a genuine mistake — the present time-scale makes a further application impossible. It is also very difficult, during an election campaign, to find out why an application has been refused. That should be reviewed; people should be told.

On polling day itself, there is always a danger of personation at the polling station. You hear the most horrendous tales about this. Very few, however, can be proven. In my experience, people who engage in personation always cast the fraudulent vote first. Then they can come back to the same station later on and vote under their own name; if they are challenged they say "I am Willie Ross, here is my identity, they all know me", and the false vote has already been taken. Those intending to personate will usually vote during one of two periods. The first is in the early morning at 7 o'clock. They turn up and if they find that the opposing parties have not manned the booths with agents, they will immediately carry out impersonation. The second period is when the station is very busy, usually between 6 and 8 o'clock in the evening.

When electoral fraud has been perpetrated on a large scale the individuals involved were well organized. They will change their clothes and appearance. They will personate at different polling stations, in different rooms and at different times of the day. When well-organized they will have very accurate intelligence on the electors' whereabouts and

they will have equally accurate intelligence as to who has voted in past elections and who has not — again, a measure of the marked register's usefulness to them. They will naturally then personate those who do not vote regularly. There is no point in going to vote for the folk who — like those in this room I am sure — are out first thing in the morning to vote themselves.

So you have got to remember that this is not a new thing. This is something that has been going on, in one form or another, and not only in Northern Ireland, for a long time. It happens elsewhere.

If these persons are challenged they will usually make a run for it or make some excuse and simply walk out and behave as a grossly-injured party. We have all seen that happen. It is therefore important that a challenge is made at the correct time so that an arrest can be made because nothing is more off-putting to the personating organization than to have somebody arrested early in the day. This means that you have got to have tough, sharp people in the polling station because these personators will always try to behave totally naturally. It is because of this that party polling agents, who are only ordinary men and women, are reluctant to charge with personation, since they can incur a heavy penalty if they are wrong.

Fortunately, a challenge at an early stage is sometimes sufficient to make the individual walk out; however, that does not stop them from going to another polling station or to another room to personate somebody else.

I believe, however, that it is important for the Committee to understand that there are strict limits as to the number of persons who could personate at any one election. I hear claims of thousands which I find difficult to credit. I think that you could do up to about 1,000 personations if you were really well-organized, but 1,000 is a lot of people in a constituency. You may get more in possibly one or two constituencies, but in most constituencies you would not get anywhere near that figure, and it would not be necessary to do it anyway. The figures in most constituencies are usually so heavily loaded against you one way or another that personation is not important, except for internal community battles. So, in effect, we are looking at a relatively small number of constituencies.

All parties tend to be short of workers on election day. All parties tend to be short of information and, of course, other parties will have polling agents in quite a lot of the polling stations rendering personation more difficult. What matters here is for people to have personal knowledge of the individual. You have only got to know 300, 400, 500 or 600 people. Not everybody can identify 600 people. I am told that a hen can recognize about 30 other hens and sometimes I think people are the same. I am not so sure that I do not fall into that category myself. We all know people in our parties who have photographic memories for names, faces, individuals and if you could get one of those folk to work for you on election day there would be no personation. So, it is a case of having the right folk there.

The real difficulty arises where parties do not put in polling agents or when intimidatory tactics are used to gain possession of identification papers which do not have a photograph. In order to combat the above it is vital that each constitutional party has polling agents at every box. My party had deserted this practice for some years but is returning to it

in several areas. Failure to do that leaves it easy for the personator, as the presiding officer, the clerk, as well as the RUC are all powerless unless the person personating is challenged.

Polling agents have got to be familiar with people voting in the room and fully understand the extent of their powers. We need to look at limiting the danger to a polling agent if he should make a wrong challenge and, in particular, the difficulties here posed by the threat of paramilitary activities. One or two of my agents told me that whenever they were operating in strongly Republican areas they found that, although other Nationalist parties had agents present, they were extremely reluctant to open their mouths. We need to be careful about that and parties need to check and recheck the register as must the deputy-electoral officer of the constituency.

Local knowledge is an absolute essential in ensuring the accuracy of a register. But it is difficult for a polling agent to know everyone who is entitled to vote at a particular polling station unless they are those rare individuals that I have already touched upon. Above all, there has to be an improvement in the identification procedure. This is the absolute key. The key here is having acceptable documents in order to identify an elector. It is also essential that the police have security outside the station, its gates, and other entrances and approaches to it. There is nothing more intimidatory to many people than to turn up at the gate of a polling station and find 20 or 30 young men of somewhat rough appearance, with loud voices and rough behaviour standing round the gate. That has to be met and dealt with. In some areas this will mean not only very firm, but very visible control by the police and the Army. They have got to be there in numbers.

The presiding officer should also keep an official record of persons who have been refused a ballot paper and the grounds for such refusal. For example, the vote may already have been cast or the identification of the applicant may be faulty. The nature of the faulty indication should also be recorded. Mr Bradley has steadfastly resisted all our requests that this be done. I think that it is essential because there are a great many people who are permanently put off voting by being refused on the grounds that they do not have proper identification. We have all had cases of people complaining that they turned up with their plastic driving card only to be told that this was not acceptable identification without the other bit of paper. Others say that they turned up with their firearms certificate which has a photograph but this was not acceptable.

So we have all sorts of difficulties in this field and there seems to be an assiduous attempt by Government and the chief electoral officer to avoid determining the exact extent of that problem. It is a very real problem and I think that one of the reasons for the drop in our turn-out in some areas is because people have felt that they have been insulted and they tend to blame their own party for denying their vote. It is all our fault.

As I have said before, I believe that the vital ingredient to diminish fraud on polling days is proper identification of the electorate. The current list of acceptable documents is not good enough as not all have either a photograph or a date of birth. All are transferable, either willingly or not, and we know that medical cards have been forged in the past since the police have seized quite a large number of them. Finally, there is no guarantee that every elector has one of the documents listed. A surprising number of people do not have one; for example,

pensions and so forth can now be paid directly into a bank account so doing away with the need for a pension book.

I have looked at this matter with great care over a long period of time and have listened to all the arguments. I am therefore sadly forced to the conclusion that only a proper identity card, incorporating a photograph, and, preferably, a national insurance number (unique to the individual) will be sufficient for the accurate identification of every elector. Everyone would have to hold an identity card. They could be of such a nature as to render their use by impostors extremely difficult. If we are to protect the electoral process it is vital that not only our register is accurate but that we are protecting the right of people to cast their ballot so that we get a true reflection of opinion. Despite the real difficulties involved in the production of the identity card in having everybody photographed, and the many objections that will be raised — and there are real objections, especially in the civil liberties field — I think that this is a policy which should be carried through into legislation.

That is my submission, Gentlemen.

The Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr Ross. You have raised quite a lot of issues and your written submission is very beneficial to the Committee.

I would like to start the proceedings by raising the question of the marked registers. On quite a number of occasions you have referred to them as creating problems. Do you think that they should not be made available?

Mr Ross: I think that it needs to be given careful consideration. There is no doubt that registers are extremely useful to legitimate parties in identifying people who have not voted, and in finding out from them the reasons why their party has lost favour with that particular group of electors. In a normal or peaceful society I would be quite happy to have them made available. Indeed, parties can get them anyway if they put people in the polling stations and mark them. They would be 90% accurate and they have been in the past.

But, my problem lies with those unconstitutional parties — as I would prefer to call them — who now taking part in elections, who are getting their hands on these registers, and then visiting the folk and threatening them. There is a huge door there, whether people care to go through it with intimidatory tactics or not, of course, is a matter for the parties but I think it is a matter which we should bear in mind when we are looking at the availability of those registers. They are extremely useful to your party, Mr Neeson, and to mine. But then we are not going out to intimidate people.

The Chairman: One of the other points that you made was that in relation to the abuse of the electoral system an awful lot of the evidence is hearsay. How can we get over that problem?

Mr Ross: You cannot. Unless those people who are intimidated are prepared to go to the police themselves to make an official complaint it will never come to court. Therefore it remains hearsay. In some areas, if people were to make an official complaint to the police, they would then be in grave danger of further intimidation and violence. I think that the

chances of having a large number of people come forward to say that this happened is non-existent.

Electoral malpractice is like all crime in that the people who know the details are those who are doing it — and they are not going to run around telling you how it was done. I have heard some hair-raising stories. Once, I was sitting on a bus and overheard some individuals from an opposing party, who had celebrated rather too well, starting to tell how they had done it, not noticing that I was sitting in the corner listening to them. I would not want to repeat such a private conversation which took place some years ago but it was certainly malpractice on a fairly massive scale.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: First of all, thank you, Mr Ross, for your very wide-ranging submission which is appreciated.

There are a couple of points you raised which I would like your further thoughts on. First of all, you mentioned the issue of personation and multiple registration — and I am thinking, in particular, of the deliberate electoral fraud where people deliberately go in to steal votes. What type of penalty, in your mind, ought to be introduced and available to the state to punish those people who are apprehended and found guilty of personation or of electoral fraud?

Secondly, there certainly seems to be a growing clamour for proper and adequate identification and I think we all know why. Have you given any thought as to who should be the issuing body for that means of identification? Should it be a national identity card? Should it be a centrally or regionally issued identity card? Should it be issued on behalf of the electoral office, specifically for elections or should it be a DHSS-type card with more accurate information and, perhaps, carrying the holder's photograph and signature?

Mr Ross: To deal with the second issue first, I think that we would want it to be general in application and something, as you say — you have evidently given some thought to this — like a DHSS-type card that would be best because there is fraud in all sorts of things which could be more easily detected if claimants for social security benefits had to produce a card with a photograph. I think that driving licences carrying photographs would be useful for identifying people at road-stops throughout the United Kingdom as we have said.

All sorts of information can be incorporated onto such a card though you will get all sorts of civil liberties arguments as to why you should not have that. I appreciate that some genuine people will raise these type of objections but who has really anything to fear from carrying round such information in your pocket in the form of a plastic card? No law-abiding citizen has to fear that. We have nothing to hide. The only people who would have real objections to it, in my view, are those who would wish to conceal what they are about. I think that it should be a general card. I do not think that it should be tied solely to the electoral process. Practically every European country has an identity card of some sort or another. I do not see any good reason why we should not have the same in this country. I would make it national since more and more stuff is going to go on computers anyway over the coming years. You cannot stop it.

The civil liberties people say that if you had a totalitarian regime they would have all this information. If you had a totalitarian regime they would acquire the information anyway. They would shoot you if you did not give it to them. They would put you in prison. It is as simple as that. So the argument is simply not valid, in my view.

As far as penalties are concerned, the penalties are quite heavy, Mr Paisley. I cannot remember, but I think you can now be fined up to £5,000 or be sent to prison; the current penalties are probably adequate if the individuals can be caught, charged and convicted.

Some folk have suggested to me that the penalty should fall on the individual who is being personated, but you cannot prove that they were involved. The candidate, of course, is innocent of all this. He does not necessarily know that somebody will be doing it and, in any case, it could be done by an opposing faction to ensure defeat, so the individual who is actually doing the personating has to be the one to pay the price. Some of the people who practice personation are, I would not go so far as to say men of straw, but certainly men and women of little wealth, so a term of imprisonment has to be an available option.

Mr Gardiner: I would like to congratulate Mr Ross on his presentation and thank him for coming along. He has shared with us today the wealth of knowledge that he has gained through years of experience in politics. I would also like thank him for his guidance in recommending the way forward. This session is being recorded and will be documented, and while we have no powers to implement a way forward I hope that those who read the report, particularly Mr Bradley and the Government, will adhere to some, if not all of its recommendations. They have been well thought out and well put together. I commend Mr Ross for this and thank him very much.

Mr Ross: May I say that I think that Mr Bradley is generally helpful. He has his own views about some of these matters of course, but I have found him to be generally helpful. I have always been able to go along and argue the toss with him; whether he won or I did, or whether he refused to accept my wise recommendations or not was a matter for him to decide. I think he, also, is deeply concerned about this matter for he has drawn my attention to some of the difficulties inherent in identity cards. However, they have to be overcome. The electoral process and the power of the vote is far too precious to be squandered or fraudulently used or abused in the way that, I believe, it is being abused, despite the fact that we are relying on hearsay evidence.

Rev William McCrea: I join with my colleagues in welcoming you and thanking you for your presentation.

You talked about people representing the different agents — representing the different political parties — sitting in polling stations and one of the major problems that was experienced during recent elections when, it was believed, there was extensive fraud was that after sitting an hour in the polling station, these agents removed themselves and seemed to have a recollection — a very clear recollection — of all those that had voted, and they were then able to transfer that to the register outside. Now it is only by knowing those who have gone in that parties then can go out into estates and identify and particularize.

The register which you receive and you talked about — the marked register — that will show the position after an election. It will contain information that could be used at the next election; it will show those who did not vote and anybody could say to them “I notice that you did not vote the last time. Is there a reason?” But I am talking about the person who is sitting in a polling station and then takes information out about people who have not yet attended. This poses a particular problem when it happens around 6 or 7 o'clock in the evening and there is still a three-hour period during which votes may be cast. What do you think can be done to stop that abuse?

Mr Ross: It is very difficult, Mr McCrea, because, as you know, the old concept of tally rooms and keeping a record of those who have voted and those who have not is not new. In former years, in those tight areas where the result was deeply in doubt, it was the case that all the major parties ran tally rooms and their supporters, either at the gate or in the tally rooms, kept tabs on who was going in and out and who was voting, and that information could be carried to the caravan, or wherever, and marked up. Some parties were very good at this, some were not so good and some never did it at all. There was also a process whereby people used to reach out their official polling card to the party of their choice so that they could be marked off in the registers in that way. Nowadays I notice that the presiding officer and his clerk usually try to get hold of the card and drop it in the waste-paper basket. You do not have to hand it in — it is your card, not theirs. You can keep it or hand it in if you wish; most people do not.

Carrying marked registers or a list of people who have voted out of a polling station is, I believe, illegal but how you could actually stop people from doing it I simply do not know. The legal authorities — the police, the electoral officer — have wrestled with this problem for a hundred years and nobody has yet come up with a clear answer. I agree with you in that I think that the behaviour of some of these folk has been abominable. They simply wrote the details down on a sheet of paper, folded it up, put it in their pocket and walked out. They did not have to carry the register out and when they went out, they simply marked up the register outside, and that was that.

Rev William McCrea: Following on from that, one of the major problems in the last Westminster election and in the council election was that in an area like Coalisland when Unionist voters came to vote, they found that Sinn Fein's tally room was outside and people demanded that they hand over their identification before they went into vote. Some people went on in, others turned on their heels and went home because they were afraid to go in. That was reported on the airwaves in the middle of election day. When this matter was reported to the deputy returning officer he said there was nothing he could do because it happened outside the polling station. The police said there was nothing they could do. Who could do something about this kind of intimidation?

Mr Ross: If their assessment that there was nothing they could do is correct, this is a gap in the law that needs to be filled and filled very urgently. Those sort of intimidatory tactics should not be allowed. It is for that reason that in my paper, I refer to the need to secure the gates and the approaches to and from polling stations and keep them under firm control. I have seen things like this happening in other places. I know quite a large part of what was your constituency; I am aware that these problems exist there as well as in some other rural areas and in urban areas such as the west bank in Londonderry.

Rev William McCrea: There is great talk about abuse on postal and proxy votes. The applications, of course, are in the control of the electoral office. Why do you think that so few prosecutions have been forthcoming? The electoral office has admitted that there has been a great increase in this and there is concern that there has been quite a considerable amount of fraud and yet no prosecutions have been forthcoming. Why?

Mr Ross: I assume that it is because there is great difficulty in proving it. Comparisons would have to be made of the signatures on every application form; the signature on the original application form would have to be compared with that on the application for the vote itself and, when the vote was returned, with the signature on that. Once the initial stage is over there are great difficulties with that. If we are going to pursue the problem which you experienced and which was quite clearly happening elsewhere — I think it happened in West Belfast — then the electoral officer needs to be given the money and the staff to do that. That is a matter for the Government. It should be made known that he has the staff and that he is pursuing it — and pursuing it with persons with the proper expertise. Those papers are all still available and there is no good reason why they could not now be pulled out, put down and comparisons made to show that one signature is clearly different from another.

Rev William McCrea: Do you feel that sufficient consideration is being given to the disabled and the elderly when the suitability of polling stations is being considered?

Mr Ross: No, I do not. We have had quite a lot of correspondence on this, both before and after this past election, and many others. However, balance has to be made. The chief electoral officer tells me that the Government is not prepared to make money available. He is of the opinion that finance should be made available by the education and library boards to make schools more accessible for people in wheelchairs. There is another problem in that polling stations have to be sited in a place which is convenient to the mass of the electorate. You cannot simply say that there is a suitable school five miles down the road and ask everybody to go there. I think that disabled people would not really want a situation where they are asked to go to a separate polling station, just because they are disabled — even if you could identify them beforehand. So we are stuck with the fact that there are some places where we will never be able to resolve this satisfactorily and, in those circumstances, we should encourage people who are disabled or infirm or who find difficulty in getting into a polling station to apply for a postal vote. In places where it is possible to make access easy we should certainly do what we can to help them, but it is not a black-and-white-situation where you can say that every polling station will be totally acceptable to every electorate. That is not possible because the buildings are not necessarily in the correct geographical position, never mind the expense that might be involved in some cases. The more modern buildings tend to be easier to access by disabled people, but there is no answer for the older buildings at all.

The Chairman: All of the issues you have raised here are important but if there were to be one change — and I am asking you to prioritize — what would be the one major change that you feel would be of greatest assistance to the electoral system?

Mr Ross: An identity card. There is no question in my mind about that. Proper identification by photograph, a national insurance number and possibly even a date of birth would help. If somebody who comes in and claims he is Mr McCrea but is quite evidently 20 years of age, then it is certainly not Mr McCrea. A date of birth on the card would show that.

The Chairman: Mr Ross, on behalf of the Committee I would like to thank you once again. We consider your submission to have been of great assistance.

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

MR C MARSHALL
ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL
ADMINISTRATORS

1870
The following is a list of the names of the persons who were present at the meeting of the Board of Directors of the City of New York, held on the 1st day of January, 1870.

The Chairman of the Board was Mr. John A. Dix, Mayor of the City of New York.

The members of the Board were Mr. John A. Dix, Mayor of the City of New York; Mr. John B. Allen, Mr. John C. Allen, Mr. John D. Allen, Mr. John E. Allen, Mr. John F. Allen, Mr. John G. Allen, Mr. John H. Allen, Mr. John I. Allen, Mr. John J. Allen, Mr. John K. Allen, Mr. John L. Allen, Mr. John M. Allen, Mr. John N. Allen, Mr. John O. Allen, Mr. John P. Allen, Mr. John Q. Allen, Mr. John R. Allen, Mr. John S. Allen, Mr. John T. Allen, Mr. John U. Allen, Mr. John V. Allen, Mr. John W. Allen, Mr. John X. Allen, Mr. John Y. Allen, Mr. John Z. Allen.

The Secretary of the Board was Mr. John A. Dix, Mayor of the City of New York.

The Treasurer of the Board was Mr. John A. Dix, Mayor of the City of New York.

The Auditor of the Board was Mr. John A. Dix, Mayor of the City of New York.

The Clerk of the Board was Mr. John A. Dix, Mayor of the City of New York.

The Librarian of the Board was Mr. John A. Dix, Mayor of the City of New York.

The Messenger of the Board was Mr. John A. Dix, Mayor of the City of New York.

The following is a list of the names of the persons who were present at the meeting of the Board of Directors of the City of New York, held on the 1st day of January, 1870.

NORTHERN IRELAND FOREM
FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Thursday 2 October 1997

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE
Mr Coby Marshall
(Association of Electoral Administrators)

ELECTORAL REFORM

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

**MR C MARSHALL
ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL
ADMINISTRATORS**

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE

MR C MARSHALL
ASSOCIATION OF ELECTORAL
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NORTHERN IRELAND FORUM FOR POLITICAL DIALOGUE

COMMITTEE ON ELECTORAL REFORM

Thursday 2 October 1997

MINUTES OF EVIDENCE (Mr Colin Marshall (Association of Electoral Administrators))

on

ELECTORAL REFORM

The Chairman: Welcome to the Forum, Mr Marshall. Indeed, welcome not only to the Forum, but to Northern Ireland — I believe this is your first visit to the province. I am sorry your plane was delayed for so long, thereby curtailing the time that you can spend here.

This Committee was set up by the Forum to investigate irregularities in the electoral system Northern Ireland and beyond. We believe that there are many issues which are common to the electoral systems in all parts of the United Kingdom.

We are very grateful that you, with your experience, have come along today. I know that it is your intention to make your presentation first and to take questions afterwards. Thank you for providing copies of your statement for members.

Mr Marshall: You have copies of my statement but I still intend to read it. First, I bring the apologies of British Midland for the difficulties in getting me here this morning. The delay has meant that my opportunity of looking round Belfast has rather gone by the board, at least on this visit.

Thank you for the invitation to attend today and for giving me the opportunity to make a short presentation on election procedures and irregularities. The Forum is to be congratulated for setting up this Committee on Electoral Reform and for identifying the various issues which require early consideration. If only we had such a committee in England.

The Association of Electoral Administrators is a non-governmental organization which was formed in 1987. It has over 1,000 members employed in electoral registration and election duties by local authorities in England, Scotland and Wales. We do not, however, have any members in Northern Ireland — I am not sure why. Many of our members are employed at the highest level in local government and have extensive practical experience of electoral registration and elections, both in the United Kingdom and overseas.

The aims of the association include the development of effective and efficient electoral registration and election systems; the promotion of knowledge amongst members; the dissemination of information on all aspects of electoral registration and the conduct of elections; and the offering of advice to Parliament, Government Departments, local authorities and other relevant organizations. We have published a number of good-practice papers which are a useful aid to all electoral administrators, and we are in the process of introducing a system of qualifications for electoral administrators.

The British electoral system is based on legislation dating back well over a century, and no exhaustive review has been carried out during that time. Any changes made have often been piecemeal, minor or technical, with little direct consequence for the voter. The democratic process which was functioning at the general election on 1 May was little different from that used at general elections in the days of Queen Victoria.

Consequently, we are preparing a paper to stimulate interest in electoral matters generally and to raise the various issues that need to be considered in any radical reform of the British electoral system. A number of key policy issues have been identified which should be considered as part of the debate on the need for electoral reform. The association feels that change is needed now — we made the same statement after the 1992 general election. The election process must be modernized and improved, otherwise the organizations which govern will become more and more remote from the people they claim to represent.

At local elections in England, less than half the electorate actually turns up to vote. It must be a matter of concern that, in the mother of democracies, the interest in elections is declining, whereas in third-world countries and emerging democracies voters are only too happy to stand in long queues or to walk for miles to ensure that they can vote. There is a growing groundswell of opinion among academics, politicians, party activists, practitioners and the public at large that the time has come for a radical and thorough overhaul of the British electoral system.

The key issues that Parliament needs to examine are: the need for an electoral commission to oversee all electoral issues and be a champion of good practice; the introduction of a system for the registration of voters which properly reflects today's society; and the modernization of the law relating to candidates, their election agents and expenses, the media, election offences and the election process so as to enable the election system to make better use of modern technology.

Some practical reforms are needed. For example, early voting would give electors, who are unable to vote in person on polling day, the opportunity to cast a vote in person before polling day. This would probably be at a single location in each constituency or council area. Early voting takes place in many other countries and enables a higher turnout to be achieved. Early voting would also enable voters to go to an office where there was state-of-the-art facilities for their assistance.

Voters who are unable, due to illness or infirmity, to visit a polling station personally have no option but to vote by post or proxy. These electors could be visited by polling

officers equipped with a mobile ballot box and ballot papers so that they could vote in person at their homes. This has happened in South Africa. This process gives the elector the opportunity to be directly involved and is better than sending complicated instructions by post. It is far more flexible in that it can accommodate unforeseen illness, and it also reduces the risk of fraud.

Voting in the United Kingdom has traditionally taken place on a Thursday, but this no longer reflects the working and social patterns of the majority of the population. Voting on a Saturday or Sunday would be better and would be likely to lead to higher turn-outs. Voting in this manner would probably be more convenient for electors and would minimize the disruption currently caused by the closure of schools and other public facilities on polling day. Most European countries vote on a Sunday.

There is also the issue of the register. The one-day snapshot of the electorate which is used to prepare the register of electors is antiquated and discriminatory. This is, perhaps, the most significant barrier to allowing people to register their vote for the area in which they live. Given the flexibility of modern technology, a rolling register allowing the public to register right up to election day — subject to certain safeguards — is essential to achieve more accurate registers and higher levels of registration and turn-out.

The association believes that the nomination process for elections is a mess. Individuals and parties bent on mischief or on deceiving the electorate have their best opportunity at nomination time.

There are also some technical issues that need urgent consideration in the light of the revision of current electoral practices. These include better facilities for disabled voters; common election rules and timetables; simplification of forms and processes; removing barriers to registering to vote; and better civic education.

Let us look at some of the issues which were raised during evidence sessions and deliberations by your Committee. You are clearly worried about fraudulent registration and voting. But one issue that you have not mentioned is whether or not a householder should continue to complete the registration form. It seems to me to be comparatively easy for a householder to add fictitious names to the form or deliberately to leave names off the form. Should it be the individual's responsibility to register?

In 1995 the Home Office issued a Green Paper on the issue of a national identity card. The association advised the Home Office that if it was decided that identity cards should be introduced, provision would have to be made for them to be used as a means of identification for registering as an elector or for an absent vote and for voting purposes, including the possible introduction of computerized voting by a smart card. If we had a national identity card, electors could quote its number on the A form, and a date of birth and other details would not be required. Whatever registration system we had, electors could be issued with a registration card confirming that they had been included on the register. At an election it could be a requirement for both registration and poll cards to be produced in order to be able to vote. The poll card would be retained in the polling station or cancelled in some way.

Then there is the question of whether the penalties for non or improper registration should be increased and whether the prosecution process should be made easier. Should EROs have the right to access the records of the public utilities, the social security agency and the Inland Revenue to check eligibility for registration? Similarly it should be a requirement for the register of births, marriages and deaths to supply details of deaths to the ERO. I am not sure if a rolling register would prevent all the fraudulent registration, but it would certainly reduce accidental multiple registration.

Many returning officers undertake an early issue of poll cards to encourage electors to make applications for votes — for example, those voters who are going to be on holiday or working away. In other cases, poll cards are not delivered until after the time for withdrawal of nominations just in case an election is not contested. In any case it is too late for registers to be corrected. Indeed, EROs currently have no powers to make corrections even if a mistake is made by them or their staff.

The social survey division of the Office of National Statistics undertakes an annual survey on behalf of the Home Office. This latest report compiled from the electoral register of 1996 was published on 15 August of this year. The survey is based on responses from EROs in England and Wales. The report's summary and main findings cover how electoral registration officers compiled the 1996 register, the relationship between canvas procedures and response, and conditions conducive to a successful canvas.

In addition, ONS offers each local authority individualized feedback indicating how well its canvas response compares with what might be expected based on their findings from all the local authorities. It highlights where there is underregistration and also the fact that there are so many different ways that EROs go about the same job.

Establishment of an electoral commission might lead to some consistency in the way the register is produced. However, as far as resources are concerned, electoral registration and elections have always been a Cinderella service in local government and I cannot see any real improvement in the near future. In fact, the trend is towards further cut-backs in salaries and expenditure following the retirement of election administrators. That is certainly the case in England and Wales.

Turning to the provision of suitable and convenient polling stations, I certainly agree with the suggestion of having a cordon sanitaire at polling stations, though possibly for a different reason than that put forward by your Committee. I also believe that the returning officers should be able to requisition premises such as halls and rooms available for public hire.

The provision of polling stations is a matter of concern to many election officials, some of whom are put under pressure by political parties and individual politicians regarding location. In England and Wales we are able to use most schools free of charge for polling-station purposes, subject, of course, to payment for heating, lighting and cleaning.

However, there is increasing concern from teachers, school governors, local education authorities and parents about the disruption caused by schools being used as polling stations. As I mentioned earlier, a change to weekend voting would make more schools and local

authority offices available, and any of these have very good facilities for disabled voters. There is also increased security concern at schools following Dunblane and similar incidents.

A review of the location of polling stations is undertaken more frequently than in the past, and election administrators are becoming more aware of the problems encountered by disabled and elderly people. Scope, formerly the Spastics Society, undertook surveys of polling stations in England and Wales in 1992 and 1997 in an attempt to gauge how accessible they are to disabled people who wish to vote on election day. Despite initiatives taken by many electoral administrators, the 1997 survey apparently suggested that many problems still exist: many entrances were either locked or unsuitable, and disabled people were having to vote in the street and in cars.

The association is continuing to have dialogue with the officers from Scope and has agreed that there could be some advantage in meeting them and other disability organizations to discuss areas of mutual interest. The Home Office currently makes grants of 50% towards the cost of providing temporary access ramps and 80% for polling screens for voters with disabilities. We would like to see a 100% grant.

I now turn to the question of postal and proxy vote abuse. All members of the AEA agree that the whole system needs to be completely overhauled to make it simpler and less open to abuse. As I mentioned earlier, early voting and mobile polling stations could help in this respect.

Electoral administrations in England and Wales have been becoming increasingly concerned about the possibility of large-scale postal and proxy voting abuse. Organizations such as M-Power and Rock the Vote encourage students to register to vote, and many registered at both their home address and their college or university address. There is nothing illegal in this. They are then encouraged to apply for postal votes. However, there was no mechanism to ensure that they only voted once at the general election. This also applies to second home owners who are registered at two or more addresses.

Our members have been concerned for a long time about the possibility of "granny farming". In 1995 the Home Office ordered an enquiry following a 'Daily Mail' revelation of a vote-rigging scandal in Birmingham. In 1992 there were proxy voting irregularities in the Penwith District but no action was taken. As an elections officer with over 30 years' experience, I am confident that, were I an election agent or party supporter, I could affect results in marginal constituencies or wards from my knowledge on postal and proxy voting. Has anything been done to prevent further abuses? The answer is no.

Following the 1992 general election the Home Office announced that it would be undertaking a review of electoral law, procedures and practice in the light of the election experience. Its aim was to consider any problems or difficulties which arose during the election period and to determine if any changes needed to be made in order to assist the smooth running of future election campaigns. Five working parties were set up to consider the various issues raised, but very little happened before the election of 1 May this year. What did happen though was that the Home Office kept the politicians and practitioners apart during the deliberations of the various working parties. We are determined that this will not happen again.

Harry Barnes introduced the Representation of the People (Amendment) Bill in 1993 and again in 1995 which was aimed at increasing electoral registration. Jeff Rooker introduced the Parliamentary Elections (No 2) Bill which put into legislative form all the recommendations of Section 2 of the Plant Commission Report dealing with election law and voter participation. Both Bills were defeated. Jack Straw, whilst in Opposition, called for urgent action to give the right to vote to two million Britons who, apparently, were not on the electoral register. Again nothing happened.

Our members have had considerable experience of elections overseas. We have sent observers and technical advisers to more than 40 countries to assist with elections, and there are lessons to be learnt from the good practices adopted by many of these countries.

There will, no doubt, be changes to electoral law within the life of the current Government. However, the association is concerned that legislation will be introduced in a piecemeal fashion. What is needed is a complete overhaul of our electoral system, and the sooner the better. That is my introductory presentation, Mr Chairman.

The Chairman: Thank you very much, Mr Marshall. Your presentation was very interesting and what is of particular benefit to the Committee is your own first-hand experience in dealing with these matters.

I have just a couple of general questions to start with. First, in relation to England and Wales, when are the present electoral registers compiled?

Mr Marshall: We have a qualification date of 10 October, exactly the same as in Northern Ireland. The practice is that each individual local authority appoints an electoral registration officer whose duty it is to make an annual compilation of the register. The practice is for electoral registration form A to be circulated towards the end of the summer. I do it at the end of August.

Unfortunately, there is an increasing trend for electoral offices to start earlier. I know of one occasion when they started delivering at the end of June which meant that the registers were even more out of date by the time they were brought in.

So we work to the same process as in Northern Ireland. The draft register comes out in December and it is introduced in the February of the following year.

The Chairman: One problem that I have come across recently is the non-collection of completed forms from homes. Is that a problem in your area as well?

Mr Marshall: It is not a problem in my area.

I have a system of hand delivery of registration forms with a postal return, and then we send a reminder. That reminder is the second stage. The hand delivery at the first stage is to enable my canvassers to ensure that a form is delivered to every property within their canvas area. It also enables them to make notes of those properties which are empty on

delivery date which they then recheck on 10 October to see if they are still empty, and also to pick up on any new developments.

We have a good working relationship with our planning department and they advise me of what new developments are taking place, so I am able to bring them in. Our computerized election registration system is property based, so even if a property was empty on 10 October last year a form will still be printed this year for that property. Therefore, there is no chance of its being missed in the register.

As far as collection is concerned, we keep the systems constantly updated by watching how the returns are going. We can see on a daily basis how the returns are going, and we can compare it with previous years.

The Chairman: So you work very closely with other related agencies then?

Mr Marshall: Yes, certainly. We work closely with our council tax department, with our planning department and with our housing department — we have good working relationships.

Mr Gardiner: Thank you, Mr Marshall, for your presentation which has certainly raised some very valuable points for us.

I am looking at paragraph 9 which states that

“Early voting would give electors unable to vote in person on polling day the opportunity to vote in person before Polling Day.”

Could you elaborate a wee bit more on that for us?

Mr Marshall: One of the problems that we have is that, very often, people who were going to be away or are ill feel that they are not part of the real process because they have got to vote over a week in advance of the election's actually taking place. Moreover, if anything happens in between times that might affect how they would vote, they would not have the opportunity to change their minds.

We find as well that very often people are disenfranchised because they have missed the date for making applications for postal votes and they suddenly find that their employer has sent them away to work in other parts of the country or overseas.

We also think that if the early voting system were extended to cover establishments such as residential homes, nursing homes and warden-aided schemes, it would cut down the possibilities of fraud. I made reference to “granny farming” because this was aimed at the possible abuses at these sorts of establishments. I think it would cut down the possibilities there. It would also mean that we would not be throwing out as many postal votes when they came back because the identity forms had been filled in incorrectly.

We think that it would give people a better chance to see or to feel that they were involved in the process and also, we hope, to cut out some of the possible abuses.

Mr Gardiner: Would you be recommending then that, say, a week or a fortnight prior to the actual polling day, some offices be opened for that purpose?

Mr Marshall: Yes. We have not gone into that technical detail yet. We want to find out what sort of support there is for it generally.

When I was in South Africa the procedure there was to have early voting the day before the election. In fact, it was a combination of early voting and mobile voting. I spent my day before the South African elections in a prison actually watching the prisoners voting. So it could be one day, it could be two days before.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Thank you, Mr Marshall, for your erudite presentation.

In paragraph 3 you indicated that your organization published a number of good-practice papers. They are useful for administrators and you state that you are in the process of introducing qualifications for electoral administrators. Could you give us an insight into the nature of your good-practice papers and the sort of qualifications that you have in mind? Would it even be possible for you to forward us those papers?

Mr Marshall: Yes. I had intended to bring a copy of the good-practice papers with me but, unfortunately, I left it on my desk. However, I will have a copy sent over to you which you should find interesting. I will also send you a copy of the syllabus for our proposed qualifications. It is pretty comprehensive but we have discovered one problem. Because the electoral system in Scotland is different, our colleagues there have said that some of the things on our syllabus would not be applicable to them.

We had thought of introducing the good-practice papers some time ago. Initially, we were going to call them best-practice papers, but we felt that as it was not necessarily the best practice, the name should be changed to good practice. We found that there were so many different ways in which people could do the same task that we felt it would be a good idea if we gave our administrators some guide-lines for dealing with different situations — for example, dealing with parish polls or how the register is prepared; dealing with matters relating to staff appointments; and dealing with the provision of polling stations. So we have quite a lot of different sections at the moment, and we are going to include some more. We are not necessarily saying “This is the way you should do it.” We are giving them examples of what we feel is good practice and thus should be considered within the election process.

Unfortunately, I did not bring a syllabus for our proposed qualifications. However, if I had, you would have seen that it is very technical. This is a good example of why our election system needs a complete overhaul because it is these technical matters that we are going to be asking our students to look at. It makes you wonder why we have not changed our system for such a long time. We are hoping to introduce these qualifications within the next year or so.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Will they be compulsory?

Mr Marshall: No. However, we would encourage those starting a career in electoral administration to take them. Those of us who are looking forward to retirement in a few years — I am going to do some overseas elections then — may not actually take them ourselves. Very often we will be the initial examiners of the process.

Rev William McCrea: You spent a lot of time talking about the problems of getting people out to vote and about how you could increase the vote. However, where electoral fraud occurs in the province, the very opposite is the case. For example, in my constituency we have no problem getting people out to vote. We have a turn-out of up to 95%, but some people are casting votes to which they are not entitled. This is one of the problems that we are trying to face: how do we stop people from stealing others' votes?

Mr Marshall: You are talking about organized personation. Having looked through the report of your discussions in June, I have to say that in England, fortunately, we do not have this problem on such a large scale. Our system is based more on trust than that in Northern Ireland. You do not have to take any form of identification to a polling station. You do not even have to take a poll card. You just go there and say "I am Colin Marshall. I live at such and such a place."

This is where there has to be a radical look at our system because it is based on trust. My belief is that unless you have some form of voter identification, you are going to continue to have those problems. In the old days, polling agents sat at the polling stations and were able to question whether or not a voter was who he said he was. It happens very infrequently now. We have had no more than a handful of cases of alleged personation, but they have all been the same: electors have gone to vote and have been told that they are marked on the register as having already voted.

The problem in such cases is that they will issue you with a tendered ballot-paper. In 99-9% of those cases, the tendered ballot-papers are never seen again because the result is so wide. They ought to be looked at a bit more carefully. We get three or four in a parliamentary election and it is easy to say that it is because the presiding officer or the poll clerk has made a mistake in marking the register — they may have put a line against the wrong name.

You will continue to get personation, and it might even increase in the United Kingdom, unless something radical is done. I do not really know how, under the present system, you can stop it happening.

Rev William McCrea: I want to ask you about identification. We have identification but we continue to have this major problem in particular areas. We have people bringing welfare books and other documents which have no photographs. It is believed that, in certain places, post offices — which are not really supposed to keep the pensioners' books, but do — hand pension books over to others on polling day.

What do you feel about the idea of a photographic identification card, and do you see any major problems with such an idea?

Mr Marshall: Personally, I would support such a card but I know that some members of my association are very much against it. They think it is wrong in principle to have a national identity card. That is a personal matter but other countries have them. Most of the countries which I have visited recently — Liberia, Uganda and Ghana — have identity cards for voting. These cards include the voter's register number, his photograph and his signature or thumb mark and, as an added precaution, when he goes to vote, either a finger or thumb is inked which means that he is unable to vote again. I have no problem with the idea of an identity card.

Rev William McCrea: You talked about gathering your information through your officers. First of all, your people hand out the forms and then they are posted back. Under our system, the Post Office sends out the form and someone calls to collect it. However, I have discovered a major problem recently — some people are not having their forms collected.

You also suggested that voters should be able to register right up to the date of the election. My problem, again in my constituency — and this is where electoral fraud comes in — is that many names were added to the register in the couple of months before the election which no one had heard of. When they were challenged, these people said that they did not put their names on before or on the date of registration — which is September in the province — because their parents would have lost benefit if their names had been on the electoral form. So the parents were able to claim benefit from September until very close to the election, in February or March. How do you overcome that if you have this constant, continual registration up to the date of the election?

Mr Marshall: One thing that most of us do differently in the rest of the United Kingdom is that, once the register has been published in February, any subsequent claims are not taken on face value. We require some documentation from the person making the claim to make sure that he was living at a particular address on a particular day. So, we do not take it on face value — we check. I think that, under our system, we can also check multiple registrations on our computer list.

There must be some way. In San Francisco you can register right up to the day. But it all has to be based on some sort of national identification card, otherwise it would not work.

Mr Peter Robinson: Welcome to Northern Ireland, Mr Marshall, and thank you for your paper.

I want to refer to one area in which Northern Ireland's practice is identical to that of Great Britain. In paragraph 25 of your paper, which refers to postal and proxy voting — and I am not sure if you were advertising for political parties in Northern Ireland to use your services — you indicate that with your experience you could be of some assistance. On the assumption that abuses that may exist in Great Britain can spread — if not here already — to Northern Ireland, what are the areas of abuse and what changes are required to overcome them?

Mr Marshall: In paragraph 25 I mentioned the possibility of "granny farming".

Mr Peter Robinson: Could you explain that? Does it mean pretending that granny lives with you?

Mr Marshall: No. At major elections we often find that somebody from a nursing home brings in a big batch of applications for postal votes from the residents. Normally the residents put either half a signature or a cross on the application and this is attested to by the matron or someone else. There is nothing we can do about these, but when the postal votes come back we notice that the same thing seems to have happened. We believe that very often the people in those homes never actually receive the postal ballot papers and that they are actually dealt with by someone else.

You could overcome this sort of abuse by mobile voting or early voting. There again, if I were an agent I would at an election petition look at postal voting as the first area of concern. We reject many postal votes when they come in because the forms are incorrectly completed. They have to be signed and witnessed, but elderly people, say a man and his wife, very often mix up the papers. They put them on the kitchen table and mix them up and we have to reject them.

There are instances when we receive applications which were originally made as postal vote applications but have been changed to proxy vote applications. We have no real way of checking these, of actually throwing them out.

There have been instances in the United Kingdom when people have complained that they submitted an application for a postal vote but were given a proxy vote. The details were changed, and someone else voted for them.

Mr Peter Robinson: The abuse of postal and proxy voting appears to be greatest in Northern Ireland. People are fictitiously registered and others vote on their behalf. The way of dealing with that is to go back to the registration.

Mr Marshall: I am not quite sure what the system is. Can you check the draft registers and make claims and objections?

Mr Peter Robinson: Yes.

Mr Marshall: We have the same arrangement but it is very rare for a political party to check my register. And they would not check who is on it; they would only tell me if I had left a street off or something like that.

Within the office, we are able to get from the computer database details of any properties at which there are multiple registrations. And if we knew that at a particular semi-detached, three-bedroomed house 12 people were registered, it would immediately alert us. It would also alert our housing department to a case of multiple occupation and overcrowding. But we are able to check levels of high occupancy ourselves and in those cases, as the election officer and registration officer, I would inquire as to the eligibility of all the people on the list.

Rev William McCrea: We can get 12 people registered in a one-bedroom flat.

Mr Coulter: Thank you, Mr Marshall. Your paper is very stimulating and you have raised some very important and interesting points. Following on from Mr Robinson, in section 26 you say

“that the Home Office kept the politicians and practitioners apart during the deliberations of the various Working Parties. We are determined that this will not happen again.”

Could you elaborate on those two bits?

Mr Marshall: Where keeping people apart is concerned, this was the Home Office. I do not think we will accept it because it was a definite case of talking to the politicians in the United Kingdom and separating us from them. And Peter Coleman — who at the time I spoke with him, was one of the senior agents for the Labour Party in London, when they were in Opposition — was very concerned that we had been kept apart because some of the things that we were advocating were also being advocated by members of the Labour Party.

The answer from the Home Office was usually that either there was no pressing need from all the political parties for change, or that the changes that were being proposed would be too costly. Also, when we got to final meetings with the Home Office — when there was also a representative from Northern Ireland present — on a number of matters where we thought that there was consensus, we were suddenly told “OK, but it will not work in Northern Ireland.” As it happens, it possibly gave the Home Office an excuse for doing nothing in the end.

We do not want to become too political as an association, but we realize that we need to talk to the politicians and to the party agents as we think that lots of our concerns are shared by them and vice versa. We need to add that dialogue and to forget about the Home Office, because in my view they are like many people in local government: they do not want change. It is easy to say “Well, let us continue as we are because there is no real problem”, but we feel that there is.

So we are now going to the politicians, and we are not just going to one party; we are going to be approaching the Liberal Democrats, the Conservatives and Labour to say that we need to talk. We are getting a good response, but I should emphasize that we do not want to become embroiled in political arguments. We are concerned that things will be introduced by the new Government, that they will be foisted upon us, and that we will be left as we have been before to sort out the best working arrangements. So we need to work with the parties.

Mr Stoker: Just to follow on from that, in paragraph 17 you ask whether EROs should have the right to access various information. Would it not be better to say that EROs should have the right?

Mr Marshall: Yes.

Mr Stoker: Do you believe that they should have access to all information when compiling a register?

Mr Marshall: In one of the bigger East Midlands authorities they have a good working relationship with East Midlands Electricity, and East Midlands Electricity lets them have details of all the changes in property down there. And we also have reasonable dialogue between some of the other organizations. But if you are going to have a completely accurate register, you have to be better able to check.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Mine is a supplementary question to Mr Coulter's. You indicated that your meetings with the Home Office were stymied in one way and another, that they were looking for an excuse and that sometimes an objection would be raised because of a Northern Ireland problem. Was that objection raised by civil servants or was it at Secretary of State level?

Mr Marshall: You would be better asking that question of the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland because he was present at those meetings.

Mr Ian Paisley Jnr: Do you have minutes of those meetings?

Mr Marshall: I think the minutes were taken by the Home Office officials. The answer is possibly no, but our association members were there, and we all know what was said. I think it was just something extra that stopped change taking place. I do not think the former Government had any intention of making any real changes. The only change that was made which had any significance was that relating to the deadlines for absent votes.

The Chairman: I think we all recognize the need for change to create a fairer electoral system, and one of the big issues has been the use of a photograph. But how big an issue is finance when trying to improve the electoral system?

Mr Marshall: It is a big issue as far as the Home Office are concerned. We can look at what is being done in other countries — and I have been to other countries where a photographic ID has worked. But the disappointing thing is that whether a rolling register or anything else is suggested here, it is always said that it would cost too much money. But there is going to come a time when we will have to say "Well, OK, it is going to cost money, but we need it." No in-depth research has been done into how much extra money a rolling register would cost. I do not believe it would cost as much as the Home Office think.

If we were to have a national ID card, it could be based on a registration card. In some countries the register is produced for a particular election and they actually have photographic identity; they have individual registration numbers. This question of finance has been used far too often as a means to stopping change taking place.

The Chairman: On behalf of the Committee may I once again thank you for coming over. Your evidence has been very helpful indeed, and you have been able to elaborate on some issues gained through first-hand experience, and we are very grateful for that. Our only hope is that the next time you visit Northern Ireland you will have more of an opportunity to see around you.

Mr Marshall: Thank you. I have enjoyed coming here. It may sometimes be slightly difficult for an administrator to come to a Forum like this. I was not quite sure what

sort of reception I was going to get in the first place, but it has been very good and I appreciate that.

I think there are obviously many more issues that could be talked about in greater depth, such as technical issues, common problems and so on. It may well be that we will have an opportunity to meet again, either in this Forum or back in Great Britain with a number of my colleagues and possibly with representatives of the political parties in England. And while we, as an association, have certain guarantees from the new Labour Government, we also know that there are more and more politicians from all of the major parties pressing for reform. So we hope we can get something done, but it may not be until I have retired.

The Chairman: The Government's consultation process will be complete at the end of this month, so we are attempting to get a report to the Forum for its approval by then and to have a follow-up meeting with the Government. But we should certainly take the opportunity to have another meeting some time in the future.

Mr Marshall: We have an annual seminar — we do not call it a conference because a lot of it is related to training — and the next one is to be held in Plymouth in February. So if any member of the Forum has the opportunity, and would like to come and join us, we might be able to arrange for some kind of informal talks. And we have reintroduced a Home Office session once again. We used to have a regular Home Office session at our seminar, where they told us what was happening or what was not happening. But we decided to drop it last year because I was getting more abuse — I tended to chair that session — and they were coming up with the same things. But this year we have reintroduced because we have a new Labour Government. So that may be a more interesting session. In fact, George Howarth, the Home Office Minister responsible for this area, has agreed to come and give a keynote speech. So I will let the Secretariat have some details about our seminar — we would welcome your attendance.

The Chairman: Thank you very much.



