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Sarah - to note
cc Team

822/06

The Electoral Commission

Sir Michael Lyons
Lyons Inquiry into Local Government
1 Horse Guards Road
London SW1A 2HQ

25 May 2006

Do note this
paper for final
section on experimentation.

Dear Michael

Pamela Gordon, Archie Gall and I were most grateful for the opportunity last Monday to touch on some of the issues emerging from your review of Local Government functions, and their relevance to the work of the Commission.

As we discussed, the role of backbench councillors since the introduction of new political management structures by most authorities and, by implication, council size is of particular relevance to the electoral review work of the Commission and its Boundary Committee. Council size is the starting point in all electoral reviews and, in inviting proposals from local authorities and others on such matters, we ask that the proposals are evidenced and underpinned by reference to political management structures and the role of councillors.

Our experience to date reflects the comments in your May report, *National prosperity, local choice and civic engagement*, about disaffection among backbench councillors since the 2000 Act and confusion over their future role. Accordingly, greater clarity about the local representative/leadership role of councillors is to be welcomed.

You acknowledged that it fell to the Commission to determine, following reviews by the Boundary Committee, new warding patterns and the number of councillors to be elected from each ward. However, where local authorities wished to experiment with new governance structures along the lines discussed in your report, I would see little difficulty in the Commission responding positively to requests for reviews where these were intended to facilitate the establishment of such structures. Of course, in any review we would be looking for well-argued and evidenced proposals in relation to local governance initiatives.

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We touched on the Commission's evaluation of electoral review policies and procedures, and left with you a copy of the proposals we have submitted to DCLG for legislative changes. Our hope is that these be picked up in any Local Government Bill that may be introduced later this year. There are two main changes we are seeking. The first is to add an extra stage to the review process, enabling the Boundary Committee to reach initial conclusions on council size before inviting proposals on warding patterns from interested parties. This approach was widely welcomed by respondents to our consultation exercise last year. The second is to dispense with the requirement in the 1972 Act that all metropolitan district wards return a number of councillors that is divisible by three (in practice, three-member wards). We believe the extra flexibility of being able to provide for single- and two-member wards in such areas would enable a better balance to be struck between community identity and electoral equality. We have also taken the opportunity to reiterate our January 2004 recommendations to Government that there should be a move to whole council elections.

So far as other aspects of the electoral review evaluation are concerned, we will be publishing a "minded" paper, giving an indication of our interim conclusions, on 3 July. I will ensure you receive a copy.

We shared with you our views on electoral services and our intended approach in relation to performance standards, funding and management. We agree that electoral services should be delivered locally but have some concerns about the capacity of a number of the, particularly smaller, two-tier districts to run efficient and effective services. This situation may be further exacerbated by changes to electoral legislation over the next two years. We have sought to provide more support to these and other authorities through a trial of experienced regional co-ordinators and encouraging authorities at county or sub-county level to work together, sharing expertise.

There would be value in exploring some of these latter issues further, together with the Commission's wider role in relation to engagement and participation in the political process. If you are agreeable, we might take this forward informally over lunch or dinner with my colleagues on the Commission. We will be in contact with your office over a convenient date.

Yours sincerely



Sam Younger
Chairman