

# Local Government and Public Services Committee

## Scrutiny Project on Electoral Arrangements

### Committee Visit to Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium

#### 1. Introduction

1.1 The remit of the Committee's Scrutiny Project is:

- To consider the issues surrounding the arrangements for local government and National Assembly elections in Wales, in particular, voter registration, voter turnout, the participation of young people and bilingual voting.
- To consider a range of measures used within other political systems to improve voter turnout, registration and the participation of young people and the extent to which they could be applied to local government and National Assembly elections in Wales.
- To consider if any additional measures are required to ensure that voting arrangements in Wales are fully inclusive.
- To make recommendations.

1.2 Between the 5<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> September 2005 the Committee undertook a visit to the Netherlands, Denmark and Belgium to acquire further evidence regarding voter registration; participation by young people; electronic voting and bilingual voting.

The members of the Committee available for the visit were:

Ann Jones AM (Chair)

Sue Essex AM

Mike German AM

Dai Lloyd AM

Brynle Williams AM

They were accompanied by the Committee Clerk, Virginia Hawkins and MRS Researcher, Alys Thomas.

1.3 This paper gives an account of then activities undertaken by the Committee during the visit and highlights some of the key issues arising from the discussions.

## 2 The Visit

### 2.1 Monday 5<sup>th</sup> September: The Hague, The Netherlands.

Firstly the Committee received a political briefing on the Netherlands at the British Embassy by Andrew Price, Head of Political Section. Andre Batenburg, of the Embassy, accompanied the Committee for the rest of the day.

The Committee visited the Electoral Council which is part of the Constitutional Affairs and Legislation Department. The Council is an advisory body to Government and Parliament on practical matters relating to elections or questions of franchise and it acts as central polling station for national elections and for European Parliamentary elections. The Committee met staff from the Council's secretariat and received briefings on the Dutch electoral system; the system of electronic voting and distance voting (use of ICT in elections).

In the afternoon the Committee visited SDU which is the state printer and publisher in the Netherlands. SDU staff gave a presentation to the Committee on 'New Vote', its pc-based electronic voting system and Members were able to try out the system.

### 2.2. Tuesday 6<sup>th</sup> September: Copenhagen, Denmark.

In the morning the Committee met with Per Bregnegaard, Copenhagen's Mayor for Education and Youth, Karsten Strorup, International Co-ordinator for Education & Youth Administration, and Merete Papapetros, Schools Development Officer at Copenhagen Town Hall. They discussed political participation by young people.

The Committee then met with Anne Birte Pade and Grete Kongstad, of the Election Unit in the Ministry of the Interior and Health where they discussed voter turnout and registration; the Danish electoral system; the Unit's role in promoting voting and accessibility of polling stations. This was followed by a lunchtime meeting with Greenland's Head of Representation in Copenhagen, Einar Lemche, and staff.

After lunch Members visited the headquarters of Konservativ Ungdom, the youth wing of the People's Conservative Party, and received a presentation about the organisation's activities from the National Chairman Kasper Hülsen and other party officials. They then proceeded to the Ministry for Refugees, Immigration and Integration where they met with Sükrü Ertosun, Chairman of the Council for Ethnic Minorities and other Council Members and staff. They discussed the work of the Council and its Local Integration Councils in familiarising new immigrants with the political system and political participation.

### 2.3. Wednesday, 7<sup>th</sup> September, Copenhagen, Denmark.

In the morning the Committee met with Karsten Lauritzen, and Mette Bode of Venstre Ungdom, the youth wing of the ruling Liberal Party. The Committee received a presentation on the organisation's

activities.

Later, Members attended a reception at the British Embassy for senior secondary school students from Falkonergaarden and Øregaard Gymnasium. Around 14 students attended with two teachers and the Committee was able to discuss the students' views about political participation with them on an informal basis.

The visit concluded with a lunch at the Ambassador's Residence. This was hosted by the ambassador, Sir Nicholas Browne and was also attended by some of the people the Committee had met earlier in the visit.

Wendy Wyvers of the British Embassy accompanied the Committee during its visit in Copenhagen.

## 2.4 Thursday, 8<sup>th</sup> September, Brussels, Belgium

First, the Committee went to Wales House where it received a presentation on the Belgian Constitution by Desmond Clifford of the Welsh Assembly Government. It then proceeded to the Federal Ministry for Internal Affairs and met Luc Smet in the Directorate for Elections. Later it met with Stéphane Toumpsin, at the Population Department in the Town Hall of Ixelles, Brussels. The visit concluded with lunch at Wales House with the Ambassador Richard Kinchen, Mr Nigel Bowie, Deputy Head of Mission and Consul-General and Wales House staff.

## **3 Issues arising from the Visit**

### 3.1 Voter Registration

A key contrast between the UK and the countries visited in the way in which voters are registered. In all three countries visited voter registration is linked to the civil registry or a national citizens' registry. Moreover, electoral lists are not public and therefore not available to political parties which means that the kind of canvassing that is feature of elections in the UK does not occur.

Members may wish to consider whether they wish to make any representations to the UK Government on the proposals to change aspects of voter registration in the Electoral Registration Bill.

### 3.2. The Voting Experience

#### 3.2.1. Electronic Voting

The Committee received demonstrations of different electronic voting systems in the Netherlands and Brussels.

The Dutch Government has been carrying major projects to roll out electronic voting (which takes place by using machines or PCs in the polling station) and remote voting (which takes place outside a polling station).

The Dutch Electoral Council stated that any system of electronic voting needs to be:

- Secret
- Soundly constructed
- Simple to use
- Able to allow mistakes to be corrected.

Most electronic machines in the Netherlands are supplied by a company called NEDAP which has also supplied them to Germany, France and the USA. However, in 2004 the Irish Government cancelled plans to use NEDAP machines for the European elections due to concerns that they do not produce a paper record of the way a vote was cast, and which are used in case of a dispute or re-count.

The SDU system which was demonstrated to the Committee was a touch screen system. The company leases the machinery and software to customers and delivers them to the polling stations on election day. The new system will be used in 2006.

Discussions are underway with regard to electronic voting in Denmark but voting centres are reluctant to bear the costs of machines.

In Belgium, the electronic voting system has been designed to closely mimic the manual system. Voters insert a card into a machine, make their choices by touching the screen with a pen and deposit their card in a ballot box. The ballot box performs an automatic count and voting cards are retained in the box in the event that a recount is necessary.

We were assured that this system is very simple to use and has met with little resistance from any sectors of the electorate.

Members may wish to consider whether they require further evidence on electronic voting. For example, regarding issues of security and cost and orientation.

### 3.2.2. Access and Absent Voters

Mobile ballot boxes are used in both Denmark and the Netherlands for people who have difficulty in getting to the polling station.

In Denmark, voters who are going to be absent may vote in advance at the registration centre. In the Netherlands a voter may vote by proxy by getting another voter to vote on their behalf in the same polling station or apply to the mayor to vote at another polling station.

In the Netherlands voters who are abroad have used postal voting. They can now vote through the internet.

In Belgium, proxy voting is allowed but voters have to register their proxy through the Town Hall. As voting in Belgium is compulsory, voters who will be absent on the day of an election are able to cast their votes in advance at their local Town Hall.

### 3.2.3. Reports

In the Netherlands a report is prepared for every polling station which picks up on any complaints or irregularities. These are sent back to the Electoral Council and a full report goes to House of Representatives.

The Committee may wish to consider which practices used in the voting process in the countries visited could improve current practice in elections in the UK and identify any it wishes to consider more fully.

## 3.3 Participation

### 3.3.1 Participation of young people

Anne Birte Pade from the Election Unit stated that voting was a strong social norm in Denmark. Furthermore, Denmark has been successful in mobilising hard to reach groups in society and young people. Danish electoral institutions, such as the political parties, facilitate the mobilisation of weak groups.

Danish schools have elected councils made up of two representatives per class. The Education team from Copenhagen Council thought that Council Committees should encourage school councils to give evidence to committee hearings. The council had written a handbook, *The Pupil's Guide to Democracy*. There is an expectation in Denmark that young people will take part in activities outside school and external organisations tend to replicate the democratic decision making structures in the schools. The young people that the Committee met indicated a strong expectation that they should vote.

In Denmark the profits from gambling are channelled towards youth organisations and both the party youth groups that the Committee met received funding from the Government through the Danish Youth Council. This means that they are independent from the 'parent' parties. The Conservatives have around 2,000 members and the Liberals around 3,000. The party groups will go to schools to recruit and to participate in meetings at election time.

Members may wish to take further evidence from local authorities and youth bodies involved in political education in Wales. They may further wish to talk to the youth sections of Welsh political parties about recruitment, funding and their activities.

### 3.3.2 Compulsory voting

Voting in all Belgian elections is compulsory and has been so for more than a century. There are various sanctions that can be imposed on non-voters, ranging from fines to, after three instances of non-voting, being banned from voting for a set period. The taking of action against non-voters is at the discretion of the local mayor's office. Of the 8% of voters who did not vote in the last national election, around 1% had action taken against them.

### 3.4. Recognising Diversity in Electoral Arrangements

In Denmark there are 74 Local Integration Councils. The Council of Ethnic Minorities is elected from the local councils. Part of the work of the Councils is to familiarise new immigrants with the political system and to encourage participation.

There are no special arrangements for non-Danish speakers as a legal requirement but some municipalities may make provision for voters in other languages.

The city of Brussels is officially bi-lingual. Each linguistic group (Walloon and Flemish) has its own voting list and, in many cases, its own candidates. In Belgium as a whole, there are three linguistic areas, Flemish, Walloon and German. Each has its own list and candidates. In each area, the voting list is only produced in the official language of that area.

There are no special arrangements for voters whose native tongue is not the official language of their voting region for national and local elections. Guidance for European elections, where any EU national can vote is produced in English and German.

There was an assumption in all three countries that, in order to be eligible to vote (either by gaining nationality or residency qualifications) a certain proficiency in the language of their adopted country was displayed by voters.

The Committee may wish to consider which practices used for taking account of the diverse needs of voters in the countries visited could improve current practice in elections in the UK and identify any it wishes to consider more fully.

Members' Research Service

3 October 2005