



Combating Electoral Fraud in Northern Ireland

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Combating Electoral Fraud in Northern Ireland

I. INTRODUCTION AND SUMMARY

1. There has been growing concern at the perceived level of electoral malpractice in Northern Ireland. The Government is committed to protecting the right to free and fair elections and electoral fraud is a crime. Indeed, the range of penalties, although infrequently invoked due to the difficulty of prosecution, demonstrates the seriousness with which this and previous governments have viewed the problem of electoral abuse. [1] Electoral abuse is an affront to democracy and the Government is determined to combat it wherever it occurs. This White Paper sets out the Government's proposals for doing so in Northern Ireland.

2. The precise extent of electoral fraud in Northern Ireland is not known; the perception that it is widespread comes from anecdotal evidence. [2] Nevertheless, it is apparent to those involved in elections, officials and politicians alike, that individuals and groups from across the political spectrum often abuse their right to vote and successfully defraud the poll. The public perception of widespread electoral abuse is itself a cause for concern, in that it has the effect of discrediting the poll and undermining the authority of elected representatives. As long as the results of elections bear such significance for the community at large, the ballot box will be the object of extraordinary effort, both legitimate and illegitimate. The Government is determined, working with the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland, the political parties and others, to put in place effective measures to prevent electoral abuse where it occurs.

3. The problem of electoral abuse has exercised Governments repeatedly over the years, and it has been an important issue again during this Parliament. It has been raised by the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland and his staff, by party officials from across the community, and by the Northern Ireland Affairs Select Committee. Together with these, the Government has examined the problem and the possible solutions with great thoroughness. Following the 1997 general election, three reports on electoral abuse were prepared simultaneously: by the Northern Ireland Forum Committee on Electoral Malpractice (1997), by NIASC (March 1998) and by the NIO (*Administering Elections in Northern Ireland*, October 1998). Minor legislative changes were introduced in 1998 in response to these reports. [3] More substantial changes are due to flow from the publication of this paper, which follows extensive discussions with all interested parties.

4. The responsibility of the Government is two-fold: to protect the democratic exercise of the franchise and to combat abuse at the poll. Any measure intended to prevent electoral fraud must be set against the effect it will have on legitimate voters. It is not the Government's intention to cause inconvenience to anyone except those intent upon fraud. Indeed, it is hoped that where the threat of fraud is reduced, the credibility of the poll will be enhanced, and that this should encourage more people to exercise their right to vote. It is the Government's policy to increase public participation in elections, underlined by pilot projects in Great Britain and changes in the law by means of the Representation of the People Act 2000. The measures outlined in this paper run contrary to the specific practices introduced in Great Britain to widen participation at elections; this reflects the very different circumstances surrounding elections in Northern Ireland. However, the ultimate aim remains the same. In partnership with the Electoral Office and the political parties in Northern Ireland, the Government believes that electoral abuse can be tackled, to the benefit of the democratic process and thereby to society at large.

5. The specific task of the Government is to ensure that the legislation governing elections in Northern Ireland provides the Chief Electoral Officer for Northern Ireland with the powers necessary to protect the legitimacy of the poll. The Chief Electoral Officer, who is charged with compiling the electoral register and administering elections, is an independent officer reporting to the Secretary of State and responsible to the courts. He is not an agent of the Government. He is only able to operate within the electoral law as it stands. The policy that this paper contains is principally concerned with changes to the law. It reflects close consultation with the Chief Electoral Officer and his staff, as well as the political parties in Northern Ireland, which have expressed broad support for the proposed reforms.

6. The proposals are:

- The collection of additional personal identifiers at registration
- The establishment of electoral investigation teams
- The monitoring of multiple registration
- The introduction of bar-coded AV application forms and declarations of identity, and, eventually, automated processing of AV applications and declarations.
- The requirement to provide a signature and confirmation of date of birth on AV applications and declarations.
- The maintenance of order at the polling station through the application of existing police powers

- The introduction of a voluntary photo-ID card (the voter ID card) for use at the polling station
- The removal of all non-photographic forms of ID on the list of specified documents
- The use of the date of birth collected at registration as a means of checking the authenticity of the proffered identity document
- The introduction of a third statutory question permitted to the presiding officer
- Incremental moves towards the introduction of a comprehensive and secure electoral identity system, probably incorporating biometric technologies.

7. These proposals are being published at the same time as the Chief Electoral Officer is announcing a number of reforms in the Electoral Office, which will have immediate effect. These are:

- (a) The initiation on behalf of the Electoral Office of a research project designed to measure the incidence of electoral fraud.
- (b) The Electoral Office will continue to investigate in conjunction with the RUC all possible instances of electoral fraud, in particular in relation to absent voting.
- (c) A return to locally-managed Absent Vote application procedures.
- (d) The issuing of renewed guidance for both polling agents and polling clerks/presiding officers.
- (e) An enhanced training provision for both electoral staff and local council officials involved in elections.
- (f) The reinforcement of existing liaison between the Electoral Office and the police.

The Government welcomes these developments and seeks in this White Paper to build upon them.

1 The penalties range from a £200 fine up to an unlimited fine or 2 years' imprisonment. Back

2 A research project will be initiated on behalf of the Chief Electoral Officer to ascertain the incidence of vote stealing. Using the marked registers available after an election, it should be possible to find out whether all those who are marked as having voted did in fact vote. Whilst this does not take account of those who vote several times under their own name, it should give an impression of the extent of vote stealing. Back

3 The Representation of the People (Northern Ireland)(Amendment) Regulations 1998, S.I. 2870. Back

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II. REGISTRATION

OBJECTIVE:

- To increase the accuracy of the electoral register.

ACTION:

- The collection of additional personal identifiers at registration
- The establishment of electoral investigation teams
- The monitoring of multiple registration

TIMING:

- Additional identifiers will be collected from the earliest possible annual canvass of electors following the passing of legislation.
- The first investigation teams will be identified from within the Electoral Office at the earliest possible date, subject to the Chief Electoral Officer's review of staffing.
- Monitoring of multiple registration will be possible from the installation of new IT capacity in the Electoral Office, scheduled for introduction in 2002.

Background

8. The electoral register is the database upon which the Electoral Office relies. It comprises the complete lists of everyone entitled to vote at the different elections - local, parliamentary and European - and provides the basis for all electoral activity. Its accuracy is fundamental to ensuring a fair poll. The Electoral Office employs hundreds of canvassers to collect registration forms by hand during the annual canvass each autumn. As a result, the Chief Electoral Officer is of the belief that his register is 91% complete and at least 94% accurate. This compares well with other electoral registers in the UK, and confirms that the electoral register is the most comprehensive personal database in Northern Ireland.

9. In practice, it would not be possible to achieve 100% accuracy of the electoral register, since the movement of the population does not allow that. However, if left, certain errors in the register open up opportunities for electoral malpractice. It includes the names of people who are not qualified to vote, often because they are not actually resident at the stated address or do not fulfil the three-month residency requirement. It also allows people to be registered more than once without being identified as having been so registered. Although it is quite legal to register at more than one address, multiple registration, where it is not identified, can allow multiple voting.

The Solution: a) Personal Identifiers

10. The Chief Electoral Officer will in future be able to collect additional personal identifiers in the annual canvass. At present, everyone who is given a registration form (Form A) is required to respond, providing their name and address for the electoral register. Other questions that may be asked are not statutory and do not require an answer. In future, however, each voter in Northern Ireland will be required to supply their date of birth and signature as well as their name and address.

11. This additional data will provide the Electoral Office with a means to identify and distinguish individual voters more securely than merely by name and address. Of all personal identifiers, the date of birth and signature are the most useful. They are immediately available and memorable to the elector. This data would be stored on the register database and incorporated into procedural checks against the name of an elector in the Electoral Office.

12. The requirement of personal information on the registration form will change the nature of the form from one that is administered on a household basis to one that is completed individually. For efficiency, a single form will still serve for a whole household. However, each person's signature will indicate individual assent to the personal data provided. Every voter will be accountable for any inaccuracies on the registration form that have allowed fraud to take place in their name. The accuracy of the form will no longer be the responsibility of only one member of a household. Where there are household members temporarily not resident at the time of the annual canvass, they will be invited to register under the provisions of rolling registration.

The Solution: b) Investigation Teams

13. The Electoral Office will conduct its own investigations into the accuracy of the register. This will build upon existing procedures, using the additional identifiers. The Chief Electoral Officer relies upon the goodwill and cooperation of the political parties, who may make checks upon the register and challenge the presence there of those whom they believe do not qualify. This is a system that has proven only partially successful.

14. The Electoral Office's investigations will comprise three elements: the scrutiny of the whole register to identify anomalous entries, the investigation of these entries, and the subsequent challenge to individual entries on the register.

15. The Electoral Office will therefore have a team of investigators whose task will be to ensure the accuracy of the electoral register. The Chief Electoral Officer and his investigators would be given express authority to crosscheck the data on the electoral register database with the records of other large-scale data gatherers. The Chief Electoral Officer will be able to remove anyone from the register who, upon investigation, is unable to demonstrate his or her entitlement to entry under a certain address.

16. The reform of staffing and IT capabilities at the Electoral Office will allow for the establishment of investigation teams in a way that has not been possible before.

The Solution: c) Monitoring Multiple Registration

17. In respect of the problem of an inaccurate register, there have been calls to end completely the practice of multiple registration. However, the Government believes that this would be an unnecessarily restrictive measure. The opportunity to register at more than one address at which one is resident is valuable for those with second homes, students living away from home, and so on. Such people should not be denied the right to elect their representative at one or other address.

18. Nevertheless, it should be possible for the Electoral Office to prevent legitimate multiple registration within Northern Ireland becoming an opportunity for multiple voting. Simple monitoring procedures would be enough to keep a check on most people tempted to use their multiple registration to vote more than once.

19. To this end, the Chief Electoral Officer, with the help of enhanced IT scheduled for introduction in 2002, will be able to identify those people who are registered more than once, and mark their names in the register to indicate this fact. This will be no more than an indicator to presiding officers and electoral officials conducting investigations. The Chief Electoral Officer's investigators will also be able to check the voting record of those who register twice. If there is sufficient evidence of multiple voting, the Electoral Office will pursue the case in the courts.

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III. ABSENT VOTING

OBJECTIVE:

- To increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the Absent Vote (AV) procedure.

ACTION:

- The introduction of bar-coded AV application forms and declarations of identity, and, eventually, automated processing of AV applications and declarations.
- The requirement to provide a signature and confirmation of date of birth on AV applications and declarations.

TIMING:

- Bar-coded AV application forms will be available as soon as possible after the passing of legislation.
- The introduction of automated AV processing will be possible from the installation of the necessary IT capacity scheduled for introduction in 2002.

Background

20. It is an established practice that voters may exercise their franchise even when they are unable to attend the poll in person. A voter who is incapacitated may apply for a postal vote or may appoint a proxy, either for a specific election or on a permanent basis. The proportion of voters applying for and using absent votes has been much higher in Northern Ireland than anywhere else in the UK.[4]

21. Absent voting practices have, unfortunately, become an opportunity for electoral fraud by some, particularly because there is a less stringent requirement to prove one's identity when applying for an absent vote than there is at the ballot box. Consequently, it is possible to defraud the Electoral Office into supplying postal ballot papers or a proxy notice to an unauthorised person without raising suspicions.

22. There are already procedures in place to check the authenticity of AV applications. The Electoral Office sends a notice to every relevant person to inform him or her that their proxy has been appointed - this alerts people for whom the application has been made fraudulently. The requirement to provide additional identifiers at registration and on any subsequent application will go some way to helping in this effort to authenticate applications. The extension of investigations into applications for absent votes will also be important.

23. However, all attempts to counter abuse of the AV system are restricted by the requirements of election timing and the additional problem of volume. Between the calling of a general election and the polling day, there need be only 17 working days. In this short space of time, voters wanting a one-off absent vote must request, receive, complete and return an application form, and the Electoral Office has to process thousands of such forms. Under such pressures, legitimate applications often have to be rejected at too late a date to submit another application and fraudulent applications slip through unnoticed. Even though the procedures have been improved since the last general election, in particular by extending the time given for the Electoral Office to process applications after the deadline for delivery, there are still means of helping the Electoral Office improve this service.

The Solution

24. The Government intends to encourage everything that would allow the most efficient processing of AV applications. In particular, applications for an absent vote and declarations of identity, which are returned with the postal ballot paper, will be given a serial number. These forms may also be bar-coded for automated accounting purposes. By redesigning AV application forms and declarations, and introducing the necessary technology, including optical character recognition systems, automated processing of absent votes will be possible. Additional speed will allow more time for investigations into questionable applications. Although voters will not be required to submit their application on an original form obtained from the Electoral Office, it will be the norm. Where applications are made on photocopied forms, the pattern of photocopying may allow some further investigation into questionable applications.

25. Both applications and declarations will require the voter to provide a signature and date of birth. These data can be compared to those on the register. Automated processing will allow the Electoral Office to make simultaneous checks against the register; declarations and applications that do not provide sufficient or correct information, as far as the Electoral Office knows, can be identified and rejected immediately.

Conclusion

26. The removal of political activity from the administration of the AV scheme is the aim of this policy. Just as the removal of party workers from the registration exercise ensured a greater accuracy of the register and reduced the potential for fraud, so too the ending of party involvement in absent voting processes can only be to the voters' benefit. There should be no fear that an unmanageable burden will therefore fall upon the Electoral Office, since the process will be increasingly automated.

4 For instance, at the 1997 general election, 38881 absent votes were authorised, that is over 2000 per constituency on average. This is approximately *double* what would be expected per constituency in Great Britain. Back

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IV. THE POLITICAL PRESENCE AT THE POLLING PLACE

OBJECTIVE:

- To end the intimidatory and obstructive practices of some political agents at the polling place, whilst recognising the useful contribution of the majority to the conduct of elections.

ACTION:

- The maintenance of order at the polling place through the application of existing police powers

TIMING:

- On-going

Background

27. Although the administration of elections is the preserve of the Electoral Office, the political parties maintain a heavy presence on polling day. Outside the polling place, party workers continue their electioneering and collect the polling numbers of voters as they enter or leave the building. Inside, politically-appointed polling agents surround the presiding officer and other electoral officials, bearing the responsibility for identifying cases of personation. The candidates and their election agents are also permitted to attend the poll.

28. On the one hand, this political presence is justifiable and useful. The parties have an understandable interest in rallying support for their cause outside the polling place. Moreover, polling agents also serve an important function at the polling station. Their local knowledge enables them to identify attempted personation (which is especially important as the Electoral Office increasingly seeks to place non-local presiding officers at polling stations). They also serve as witnesses to the activities at the polling station, and in difficult areas they offer a degree of moral support to the electoral officials in their occasionally difficult task. Without polling agents, the electoral staff would be at risk of intimidation from voters themselves.

29. However, in some areas the political presence around the polling place is also acknowledged to be a potential threat to the free exercise of the franchise. Large numbers of party supporters, with accompanying vehicles, placards and banners, can intimidate voters. Entry to the polling place may even be blocked. Although the secrecy of the ballot box is not known ever to have been compromised, the voter may decide that the discomfort of getting inside the polling place may be too great to make the effort worthwhile.

30. Meanwhile, inside the polling place a strong political presence is also a possible threat to the poll. Where a polling place contains several polling stations, the number of political agents can be very great, especially when including the candidates and their election agents, as well as new polling agents arriving to relieve those in place. Such a heavy political presence can create an atmosphere of political tension and intimidation. Presiding Officers are also subject to the intimidating presence of party supporters.

An Exclusion Zone?

31. In response to this problem there have been calls for the imposition of an exclusion zone around the polling place. That is to say, no party-political electioneering would be permitted within a certain radius of the polling place. However, in the majority of polling places, these problems do not exist and a statutory exclusion zone would be an unnecessary imposition. Moreover, even where there is a problem of intimidation and obstruction, an exclusion zone would only push the problem to critical street corners and entry points to the zone. This would cause some inconvenience to people other than those heading for the polling place. The intimidation of voters may be lessened by the imposition of an exclusion zone but enforcing the zone would create new points of conflict between some groups of political activists and police.

32. The free movement of voters should be the responsibility of the police. They already possess general powers to prevent obstructive and intimidating behaviour and these powers can be put to use in preserving order around the polling place. Efforts could be concentrated where the problems are greatest. In light of these powers, it is not strictly necessary to impose an exclusion zone. On balance therefore, the advantages of an exclusion zone are outweighed by the problems that it would

cause.

Polling Agents and Presiding Officers

33. It is not desirable at present to remove polling agents from the polling station, despite calls to that effect from certain parties. They serve a useful function that cannot be handed over to the electoral officials as long as polling remains so much more contentious than anywhere else in the UK.

34. The restrictions that apply to the activity of polling agents, when observed, provide adequate protection against abuse of this privilege. They are not permitted to transfer information from the polling station, such as the names of electors on the register who have not yet voted. There is also a recommended seating arrangement that should be observed to prevent the polling agents' presence threatening the voters. If all or most parties are able to provide polling agents then no one party is able to intimidate voters alone.

35. The conduct of both electoral officials and political agents is regulated by the Chief Electoral Officer. The Government is pleased to acknowledge his efforts in reinforcing the rules concerning conduct of elections, both on the part of his own staff and polling agents. To this end he is intending to initiate a new programme of training for presiding officers based upon the existing Code of Conduct, which outlines their various rights and responsibilities.

Conclusion

36. Ultimately, it is the Government's hope that undue party-political influence in the conduct of the poll may be ended. That is not to say that politically appointed agents would no longer be present at the poll, but that their presence would cease to be influential. At present, however, good order must and can be maintained by application of existing regulations.

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V. IDENTIFICATION

OBJECTIVE:

- To initiate a more secure system of identification and verification at the polling station.

ACTION:

- The introduction of a voluntary photo-ID card (the voter ID card) for use at the polling station
- The removal of all non-photographic forms of ID on the list of specified documents
- The use of the date of birth collected at registration as a means of checking the authenticity of the proffered identity document
- The introduction of a third statutory question permitted to the presiding officer

TIMING:

- The voter ID card will be issued as soon as the legislation permits.
- Non-photographic forms of ID will be removed from the list of specified documents once the Government is sure that the alternative voter ID card has been taken up sufficiently widely.
- The statutory question will be available for use at the first election following the passing of legislation.

Background

37. The identification of voters at the polling station in Northern Ireland is already more carefully controlled than elsewhere in the UK. Every voter must present one of a number of specified identity documents at the polling station before he or she is given a ballot paper. This measure was introduced in 1985 to help combat the problem of personation.[5] (A list of the current specified documents is at Appendix B.) Once a voter has identified him- or herself, the presiding officer must issue a ballot paper. If one of the polling agents believes that the voter is not who he or she claims to be, he or she may ask the presiding officer to ask the two statutory questions—‘are you *x*?’ and ‘have you already voted at this election?’. If the voter answers correctly, the ballot paper must be presented unless the polling agent accuses the voter of personation.

38. The ease with which identity can be falsified is a cause for concern. Amongst the specified documents, only the passport and driving licence (except old GB licences) contain any photographic identity of the holder. Non-photographic identity documents offer little concrete proof of identity and are known to have been forged on occasion. In addition, the questions that the presiding officer may ask do not offer satisfactory evidence of the voter's identity. Indeed, at present there is no way of verifying the identity of the voter; the only options are to accept the veracity of the voter's documentation or accuse him or her of personation.

The Solution: a) The Voter ID Card

39. The Government will introduce a new, voluntary photographic identity card for use at elections in Northern Ireland. The inadequacy of the non-photographic forms of identification has led the Government to believe that what is required is a list of specified documents that is limited to photographic ID. Presiding Officers will thereby be able to determine with greater certainty whether the document presented identifies the holder. However, most forms of photographic identification that voters carry are insufficiently secure for electoral purposes (e.g. travel cards, workplace passes and student cards). The passport and driving licence would remain on the list, but there will always be some people who have neither of these, particularly the elderly and the poor.

40. The voter ID card will be issued on behalf of the Electoral Office and will carry a photograph of the holder as well as essential personal data. It will include a number of security features to make it hard to forge and impossible to alter. The voter ID card is *not* a universal ID card; it will be entirely voluntary, it is expected that no more than 500,000 people will need one to vote, and it will have no purpose except to prove identity at the polling station. This proposal has been widely welcomed by the parties. It is intended that the new voter ID card will be added to the list of specified documents on introduction and that it will eventually replace the non-photographic ID on the list of specified documents.

41. An initial issuing programme will be scheduled to begin as soon as there is legislative authority. The voter ID card will

be freely and easily available. To that end, the issuing process will be conducted locally, with data- and image-capture units (that is, small teams of clerks with a laptop and a small camera linked to the computer) visiting every neighbourhood. It will operate in conjunction with a high-profile media campaign, including publicity targeted at those groups most likely to need such cards. Permanent issuing stations will subsequently be maintained at local electoral offices.

42. The medical card and other non-photographic documents will be removed from the list once the voter ID card has achieved wide acceptance. The Government is determined that no one should be disenfranchised until they have had every reasonable opportunity to acquire photographic ID. Once the Government is certain that it is safe to remove the other documents from the list, the voter ID card, the passport and driving licence will be the only ID acceptable at the polling station.

43. It may be possible in time to add other photographic identity documents to the list of specified documents. A more secure form of medical card, or other government-issued card, would, if introduced, be a useful addition to the list.

The Solution: b) An Additional Statutory Question

44. What is required in addition is an opportunity to verify the authenticity of the voter's identity document. The simplest solution would be for the Presiding Officer to check the voter's date of birth on his ID against that stored on the electoral database (see above, paragraphs 10-12). The date of birth would have been printed out on the paper copy of the register used at the polling station. (It would be necessary for this information to be kept private, available only to the presiding officer, and it would not be printed on the copies of the register available to public inspection or sold commercially.) Where the date of birth is the same on both documents, the Presiding Officer would be free to hand over a ballot paper. Where the dates of birth are quite clearly different, the Presiding Officer would proceed as if the document was in doubt and allow the voter to produce a different form of identification or accept a tendered ballot paper.

45. Errors can be made in entering data and the date of birth on one document may be only one or two digits different from that on another. Where there is reason to suppose that either the date of birth on the Electoral Register or that on the proffered identity document has been entered wrongly, the Presiding Officer would have recourse to an additional statutory question: what is your date of birth? This would allow the voter to clarify the discrepancy if necessary. If the voter gives his or her date of birth as that on the identity document rather than that on the electoral register, this would not constitute a reason for denying a ballot paper. However, if the voter gave his or her date of birth as that on the register and not that on the identity document, this would place the identity document into some doubt. The Presiding Officer would then proceed as before, allowing the voter either to provide an alternative form of ID or to take a tendered ballot paper.

Conclusion

46. At present, the ease with which medical cards can be used irregularly is a principal cause for concern in addressing electoral fraud. To require more credible proof of identity at the polling station should cut out a large part of the existing fraud. The introduction of a new form of photographic ID for electoral purposes is a simple and effective solution to this problem. In addition, with greater emphasis being placed upon the authenticity of the identity documents, the traditional task of identifying attempted personation should be reduced. Polling agents will still be required, but the burden of challenging identity will not rest solely with them.

5 Representation of the People Act 1983, Schedule 1, rule 37(1A-G) as inserted by the Elections (Northern Ireland) Act 1985, c.2, section 1(2). Back

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VI. THE FUTURE: SMART CARDS

47. These initial proposals will go a long way to addressing the concerns of the Government and of democratic society in Northern Ireland that the electoral system is subject to abuse. These changes, wrought by the Government, implemented by the Chief Electoral Officer, encouraged by the parties and adopted by the electorate, will help eliminate the remaining opportunities and incentives for electoral abuse.

48. Nevertheless, the Government recognises the potential advantages that new technologies may bring. There is the possibility of a comprehensive and secure electoral identity system. With such a system, there would be absolute safeguards against anyone registering more than once without the knowledge of the Electoral Office. More importantly, it could become virtually impossible to vote more than once. As soon as a voter had been issued a postal or proxy vote, or had voted in person, any subsequent attempt to vote would meet with rejection. Current and future IT would make this possible.

49. The ultimate aim is for every voter to be issued with an **Electoral smart card**, bearing a unique identifier. The voter would present this card at the polling station and it would be accepted or rejected automatically. The card could also be used for registering a vote. When the vote has been cast, the voter's name on a central database, and perhaps on the card itself, would be marked so that if the card is presented a second time the machine knows to reject it.

50. To ensure the effectiveness of such a system, the Government believes that biometric data would need to be incorporated into a universal electoral identity card—perhaps a finger-print or hand-geometry scan. Since every biometric measure is unique to the individual, it would be possible to provide every voter with a single, unique and instantly accessible identifier. The polling station would include a biometric reader that would identify the voter and indicate whether he or she is entitled to vote. Identification of voters at the ballot box would not therefore rely upon the presiding officer or polling agents, subject as they are to human infirmities and, in extreme cases, the threat of violence. It would rather be automated and final in its judgement.

51. These are aspirations for the future. Technologies change so rapidly that it is impossible to predict what will be the best route forward or what the timing for a more ambitious project of this kind might be. Such a comprehensive system would need to be wholly secure and restricted to the purposes of electoral administration. The Government will give further consideration to when it might be possible to initiate such a secure electoral identity scheme.

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VII. RESOURCES AND TIMESCALE

Investigation Teams

52. In the first instance, investigation teams will consist of existing members of the Electoral Office. Provision of such teams will be taken into account in the Chief Electoral Officer's review and restructuring of the Electoral Office. They will therefore be covered by the Chief Electoral Officer's budget. However, as and when it is deemed necessary, additional staff may be recruited to join this team, incurring additional cost.

The Voter ID Card

53. The voter ID card, the chief feature of these proposals, will incur costs. The proportion of the electorate holding neither passport nor driving licence is estimated to be approximately one third to one half of the electorate, that is 400-600,000 people.[6] To allow for everyone who needs such a card to request and receive one, an issuing period of up to 18 months would be required. This would be accompanied by a publicity campaign, including notices circulated during the annual canvass. Initial costings suggest a requirement of around £750,000 over two years.

54. The issuing of replacement cards could be managed through the existing structures and budget of the Electoral Office.

Timetable

55. The Government proposes to bring forward legislation at the earliest possible opportunity.

56. The issuing of the new Voter ID card will begin as soon as the legislation permits. The issuing programme is expected to take up to *eighteen months* to ensure the widest possible acceptance of the card.

57. The introduction of new IT in the Electoral Office is scheduled to begin in 2002.

58. Additional data will be collected for the first time during the first annual canvass following the passing of legislation. This canvass will also see a special campaign to promote the Voter ID cards.

59. The medical card and other non-photographic ID will be taken off the list of specified documents as soon as the Government is certain that the Voter ID card has been taken up to its fullest extent.

6 A more exact figure will be available by the end of March, following the inclusion of a question to this effect in the most recent NISRA Omnibus Survey. Back

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VIII. CONCLUSION

60. This paper sets out the action which the Government intends to take to prevent electoral abuse, to counter the efforts of those intent upon defrauding the poll and to protect the fundamental right of free and fair elections. Together with the Electoral Office and the political parties in Northern Ireland, the Government is determined to stamp out electoral malpractice and protect the practice of democracy.

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APPENDIX A—THE NECESSARY LEGISLATIVE CHANGES

- The elector's date of birth and signature shall be made required information on the registration form, Form A.
- Specific powers shall be detailed for the Chief Electoral Officer or his officers to cross-check the electoral register against the databases of other organisations and agencies.
- Those electors who are registered more than once shall have their name marked on the electoral register to indicate this fact.
- The Absent Vote application, the declaration of identity and other personal documents issued by the Electoral Office shall require confirmation of the voter's date of birth and signature.
- An electoral photo-ID card issued by the Electoral Office shall be added to the list of specified documents.
- The medical card and other non-photographic forms of ID shall be removed from the list of specified documents.
- A third statutory question—`what is your date of birth?—shall be permitted to the presiding officer.

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APPENDIX B—THE SPECIFIED DOCUMENTS

- both parts of a current Northern Ireland full driving licence, or a Northern Ireland provisional licence, or a Great Britain full driving licence;
- a current passport issued by the Government of the United Kingdom, or Government of the Republic of Ireland or the Government of a Member State of the European Community;
- a current book for the payment of allowances, benefits or pensions issued by the Department of Health and Social Services for Northern Ireland;
- a medical card issued by the Northern Ireland Central Services Agency;
- a current British Seaman's card;
- a card made of plastic issued by the Department of Health and Social Services, the Department of Social Security or the Department of Social Development with a name and national insurance number embossed on it;
- in the case of a woman married within 2 years prior to polling day, a certified copy or extract of any entry of marriage issued by a Registrar General in the UK.

Prepared 12 March 2001

