

OSCE/OSCE PA Observation Mission Statement

Soares: OSCE parliamentary delegation observes 'vibrant' election in UK

LONDON, 7 May 2010 - The 6 May 2010 general elections in the United Kingdom demonstrated that democracy is a vibrant force in the world's oldest parliamentary system. In particular, direct debates between the leaders of the three major parties sparked interest in the democratic process and in public policy in the United Kingdom.

“This is one of the most exciting and competitive elections I have ever seen, although it shows that reform may be needed to the complex system,” said OSCE PA President Joao Soares (MP from Portugal), leader of the OSCE delegation. “We welcome the recognition of need for reform of procedures expressed by the major political parties.”

The Parliamentary Assembly of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE PA) deployed a limited election observation delegation to the United Kingdom following an invitation from the UK authorities. Recent changes specifically enabling observation of elections, including from other countries, is a welcome addition to transparency and brings the UK's legislation in this regard in line with OSCE commitments. This provided international observers with access to polling stations and the counting of ballots.

The OSCE PA delegation, which was headed by OSCE PA President Joao Soares, MP from Portugal, included Members of Parliament from Azerbaijan, Georgia, Italy, Kazakhstan, Portugal, Russia and Tajikistan. President Soares was also appointed to lead the OSCE observation mission by the Chairman-in-Office of the OSCE, Kazakhstan's Foreign Minister Kanat Saudabayev.

Legislation governing elections in the United Kingdom has slowly developed over several centuries, and has long proven to be a solid foundation for a parliamentary democracy. It is clearly understood by practitioners and stakeholders in the election process, and is underpinned by widespread trust in the electoral system. The delegation expressed concern about reports that voters who were lining up to vote at the time of closing were not allowed to vote.

“I hope and expect that the authorities will reconsider guidelines instructing polling station officials not to issue ballots to citizens waiting to vote at 10:00 pm. This effectively prevented many people from voting,” said Joao Soares.

The election process was administered in a professional manner, in keeping with the long-standing traditions of the country. Some interlocutors expressed concern about the possible vulnerability to fraud of postal voting, despite safeguards introduced in 2006. A number of allegations about fraudulent use of postal voting are reportedly being investigated.

Unlike most other electoral systems in the OSCE, the pure first-past-the-post system in the United Kingdom allows for a distribution of seats in parliament which does not reflect the preference of the general electorate in the United Kingdom.

The parties' campaigns were widely covered in the media. Free advertising on television was provided to major contestants, and the absence of paid political advertising provided for a level playing field. The pluralistic press reflected the wide spectrum of views and at times specifically supported different candidates and parties.