

Post-Election Statement

United Kingdom elections a strong demonstration of trust in democracy, say international observers from the OSCE

LONDON, 8 May 2015 – The 7 May General Elections in the United Kingdom provided an opportunity for a thorough debate on challenges facing the country, and voters could freely cast their ballots in a strong demonstration of democratic processes, observers from the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly concluded. They noted that several aspects of the system were based on a culture of trust, some of which might benefit from additional safeguards. Extensive and critical coverage of political campaigns by the media permitted voters to inform themselves about their options.

“This has been an exciting and highly contested election, showing that the democratic spirit remains strong in the United Kingdom,” said George Tsereteli, leader of the observer team. “We were pleased to see the United Kingdom deliver on their OSCE commitments to hold democratic elections of a high standard. We wish the new government success in carrying out their important responsibilities in the coming years.”

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe Parliamentary Assembly (OSCE PA) deployed an election observation mission to the United Kingdom following an invitation by the United Kingdom Government. The invitation to observe was in line with OSCE commitments. The mission included parliamentarians from 17 OSCE countries, headed by OSCE PA Vice-President George Tsereteli (MP, Georgia), who was also appointed by the OSCE Chairperson-in-Office as Special Co-ordinator and leader of the short-term OSCE observer mission. Observers visited nearly 200 polling stations in several cities and regions.

In a vibrant campaign, voters had a wide range of both political parties and independent candidates to choose from. Some 3,900 candidates representing more than 100 parties contested the elections, offering genuine political alternatives. A strong regional component came into play in the election, with regionally-based parties competing with the traditional country-wide parties. Contestants conducted extensive door-to-door campaigning, and campaigns by leading candidates were also covered extensively by the broadcast media. Parties engaged in substantive debates on many of the significant questions facing the United Kingdom, with health issues and the future relationship with the European Union among the main issues addressed on the campaign trail.

Extensive and critical news coverage of the campaign ensured that voters were able to weigh their options. Broadcast media is carefully regulated, requiring impartial reporting on the elections. Print media is pluralistic and tends to be more biased, with newspapers often endorsing parties and candidates. While paid political advertising is not allowed on television, as in most OSCE countries, this does not appear to have been a hindrance on candidates’ abilities to convey their messages to voters. These restrictions may be an effective way of limiting the impact that money has on political campaigns, which the OSCE PA has commented on negatively in other countries.

The legal framework, while complex, is well understood by the contestants and overall was effectively implemented by election administrators. Interlocutors expressed confidence in the legislative basis for elections, but noted that it could benefit from consolidation and simplification. Recent changes enabling voters in line at the time of closing to cast their ballots, as well as safeguards for postal voting, were welcome improvements. Some interlocutors expressed their hope that more rigorous identification requirements might be implemented. The presentation of some form of identification document is a generally accepted practice in many countries to counter the potential for fraud, and could be considered within the ongoing electoral reform process, noted the observers.

“We were pleased to see that the authorities responded to our recommendation following the 2010 elections to enable voters in line at the time of closing to cast their ballots,” said Mr. Tsereteli. “This, and other aspects of electoral reform being discussed show that democracy and democratic processes are dynamic and need constant attention, also here in the world’s oldest parliamentary system.”

Voter registration procedures have been adapted since the previous elections to move from household to individual registration. While the switch to individual registration is a welcome change, some interlocutors expressed concern regarding the possible under-registration of some parts of the population including first time voters and students. The observers encouraged a broad and inclusive approach to the registration of voters. The United Kingdom has committed itself to guaranteeing universal and equal suffrage to all adult citizens. The lack of voting rights for prisoners is at odds with this commitment.

Unlike most other electoral systems in the OSCE, the first-past-the-post system allows for a distribution of seats in parliament which does not necessarily reflect the preference of the general electorate in the United Kingdom, but the observers noted that a 2011 referendum proposing a more proportional electoral system was defeated. The significant variation between the populations of some constituencies also somewhat undermines the equality of the vote.

The Electoral Commission played an important and useful role, providing guidance materials to ensure consistent management of the elections by election administrators. Local government offices around the country have long experience in running elections, and contestants expressed confidence in a smooth process. In all regions visited on polling day, observers found the elections to be exceptionally well administered.

“I applaud the professionalism of election administrators and their dedication to their work. The Electoral Commission, Returning Officers, and several hundred thousand poll workers and counting agents made an essential and valuable contribution to the process and should be proud of their efforts,” said Tsereteli.

The election observation mission of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly included parliamentarians from Austria, Bulgaria, Croatia, Czech Republic, France, Georgia, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Italy, Kazakhstan, Poland, Portugal, Romania, the Russian Federation, Slovenia, Sweden. Following briefings with electoral authorities, political party representatives, journalists and analysts, on election day the observers visited a limited number of polling stations in several cities in the United Kingdom. The observers thank the authorities and people for their hospitality and co-operation.

For further information please contact: Director of Elections Andreas Baker, Tel: +45 60108126.