

**Commission on Civil Society and Democratic Engagement
Response to questionnaire;**

1. **Question:** What sort of campaigning activity does your organisation want to do ahead of elections (irrespective of regulation at this stage)?

For the 2015 General Election we will develop some policy 'asks' through a listening campaign throughout our member institutions. This will involve several thousand people in one-to-ones and small group meetings, and then several executive meetings to clarify and refine the list. The 'asks' will then be posed to the main party leaders formally at a large Civil Society Assembly (the Citizens Assembly in 2010 was held at Central Hall and 2500 attended, and was also streamed to supporters). We will publicise the results around our member institutions.

Our normal campaigning will in any case continue throughout the year and will include issues which could be manifesto differences between parties. Recent and current campaigns include immigrants' rights, the living wage and social care.

2. **Question:** Is policy campaigning important ahead of elections in a democracy? If so why, and what is your organisation trying to achieve?

Our whole ethos and charitable objective is about involving citizens in politics: that is to say, campaigning about issues that affect their lives and their interests, and addressing politicians, government institutions and others holding power. Election assemblies (hustings) at which we hold politicians and other power breakers to account are a major part of this. Our objective is to engage citizens and to enable them to campaign on their own behalf and in their own interests using their membership of Citizens as a vehicle to do so.

3. **Question:** Is it right that voluntary organisations try to influence the policy positions of parties, elected politicians and candidates?

It is the essence of a healthy democracy that everyone has not only the right but the duty to try to influence political policy. Voluntary organisations are no more than associations of people with shared interests. In our case, because our member institutions have such a wide base – they include faith organisations, community organisations, educational institutions, trade union branches and other elements of civil society – our campaigns reflect very serious issues affecting very large numbers of people.

4. **Question:** Is it right that voters should understand politicians' policy positions and what voluntary organisations think about these positions? – or would that information unduly influence politicians?

If voters have specific concerns that are being expressed by a voluntary organisation, they want to know, and have a right to know, what candidates intend to do about those concerns.

5. **Question:** What are the principles that regulation of third-party campaigning should be based on?

We accept that there should be some regulation of third-party campaigning and that any such campaigning should be transparent. However, the 'normal' campaigning that voluntary organisations do should not be counted as third-party campaigning, even if it coincidentally chimes with any one party's manifesto.

6. **Question:** What transparency is needed in relation to donors who give money towards a campaign run by a voluntary organisation? (i.e. registration thresholds and how burdensome reporting should be – size of organisation, timescale ahead of elections)

All of CUK's funding is transparent and information on it is readily available, for example to the Charities Commission and to the funding charities to whom we regularly make bids. This has been the case since we were founded in 1989.

7. **Question:** Are you concerned about a current lack of transparency?

We are not aware of any lack of transparency on the part of voluntary organisations.

8. **Question:** Should regulation of voluntary organisations be based on those for political parties? If so, why? E.g. Should spending limits for voluntary organisations be based on a percentage of political party spending? If so why?

This is not an issue we have considered as an organisation, as we have never been considered to be a third party campaigner under existing law.

9. **Question:** Should definitions of campaigning activity for voluntary organisations be based on a percentage of political party spending? If so why? And do you have any thoughts about what the percentage should be?

It is important to distinguish between campaigning directed specifically at an election and 'normal' campaigning.

10. **Question:** Do you think the existing law regulating third party campaigning works – or are changes needed? What changes, if any, would you propose?

We have seen no evidence to demonstrate problems with existing law nor understand the need for any change at this stage.

11. **Question:** Part 2 of the Lobbying Bill proposes to introduce changes to the current regulation of non-party campaigning ahead of elections – how do you think they would affect your organisation’s campaigning activity? You may wish to draw on plans for the next general election, or on campaigns you ran at the last election.

Given the inclusion of salaries and other costs, it is inevitable that the listening campaign and Citizens Assembly described above (question 1) would put us above the threshold for registration. In this case, we would have to undergo a huge and very burdensome monitoring of costs. In fact it would be impossible to monitor the sort of costs involved in the listening campaign to the level which might be expected by the Electoral Commission, as so many of the activities will be conducted by our member institutions rather than directly by Citizens UK. Potentially therefore we would be prevented from undertaking the very activity we were established to pursue – **‘developing the capacity of the people and institutions of the UK to participate in public life’**.

12. **Action:** Please can you gather specific examples of campaigning activity that is planned or happened at the last election that:

- a. Could not happen under the Lobbying Bill
- b. Would be much more difficult
- c. You feel your organisation would be deterred from carrying out as a result of the prospect of falling close to / foul of the law

The impact on our specific election-related activity is described above.

However, given the fact that what we do is ‘encourage our members to participate in public life’, and that most of our campaigns are on issues which are likely to be of political contention in an election, the Bill could be interpreted to limit our total expenditure to £390,000 if staffing and other costs are taken into account. As Citizens UK’s anticipated expenditure in 2014-5 is £1.5m., the impact would be disastrous in any case. However, it is probable that costs incurred by our member institutions (currently over 200) would be covered by the Bill’s provisions in respect of coalitions, which would make it impossible for us to continue to exist, as we have no means of collecting and verifying the information.

In effect, we would have to take a decision on whether to continue to function, and risk criminal prosecution.

13. **Question:** Do you agree with the thresholds set for third parties needing to be registered with the Electoral Commission as set out in the Bill? Do you have any suggestions for what the thresholds should be?

There is no evidence that existing thresholds cause any problems.

14. **Question:** Do you agree with the limits on constituency spending by third parties set out in the Bill? If you do not think the limits set out are right, what would be appropriate?

15. **Question:** What do you think the particular effects of Part 2 of the Lobbying Bill will be on your campaigning in Scotland/Wales/NI?

We currently have no organisation in Scotland or Northern Ireland although are at early stages of building a Citizens Alliance in Glasgow and Edinburgh. However, we have started to organise in Cardiff and expect to be campaigning around Welsh Assembly elections in the same way as UK elections. In any case, our 'normal' campaigning, if this were to be counted as third-party campaigning, is already costing more than £22,000, even leaving out the costs to our member institutions there, so the effect would be the same as outlined above.

16. **Question:** Do you think there should be a pause in the passage of this legislation? How long do you think this pause should be?

We agree that there should be a pause, to enable proper consultation with affected organisations. At the moment, it is difficult to assess how long the pause should be, as we cannot understand what the government's objectives are or what evidence there is that the present law causes problems.

17. **Question:** If this Bill passes, how long do you think the Electoral Commission should take to consult civil society on its guidance?

We do not know the capacity of the electoral Commission. Citizens UK alone presents several complex and possibly unique questions as to thresholds, coalitions, etc., and there are presumably hundreds of voluntary organisations with their own unique issues. The Electoral Commission would need to have enough time to give comprehensive guidance.

18. **Action:** Please share any other thoughts which you feel your organisation would like to share with the Commission on Civil Society and Democratic Engagement.

Our community organising is no doubt sometimes a challenge to politicians particularly when the focus is on Elections – local, regional and National. That is what politics in a free society is about. However, we seek to build a relationship with them, and have done so satisfactorily, for example, with both Ken Livingstone and Boris Johnson in London and Nick Clegg, David Cameron and Ed Miliband nationally.

We cannot believe it is the government's intention to prevent us, or other voluntary organisations, from engaging people in non-party political activity. We agree with the argument that secret lobbying by powerful interests is a potential threat to democracy. However, the effect of the Bill, if passed without radical amendment, could be to prevent the broad political engagement work that Citizens UK and other voluntary organisations do, thus radically weakening democracy and strengthening the relative power of lobbyists.

Neil Jameson. Executive Director. October 2013.

