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PAGE 1: About you

Q1: What's your organisation called?

The Students Union, Queen Margaret University

Q2: What's your email address (so we can get in touch if we need to)?

fboden@qmu.ac.uk

Q3: Where in the UK is your organisation based (England, Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland)?

Scotland

PAGE 2: Third party campaigning

Q4: What sort of campaigning does your organisation want to do ahead of elections (irrespective of legislation at this stage)?

We take part in campaigns run by NUS, in conjunction with other Unions and NUS (previous example was making candidates pledge not to increase fees, then promoting photographs of candidates with these pledges.)

We also arrange hustings and voter registration drives, and encourage people to vote.

We also sometimes join other local SU's in writing a student manifesto.

Generally- we ensure student issues are high in manifestos, promote certain issues like fees and sometimes mention candidates who are sympathetic towards our stance on these issues.

Q5: Is policy campaigning important ahead of elections in a democracy? If so, why? And what is your organisation trying to achieve?

Definitely- often not for profit organisations give a voice to people who otherwise wouldn't have one, which enables them to have a fair hearing. Without risk there's a chance they wouldn't get heard, or if they didn't mobilise in large numbers then they'd be too small to take on organisations who can buy attention to their issues.

At its heart, our organisation aims to ensure that students have the best time possible at university, and in terms of policy this can mean access to fair funding, widening access so more people have access to education, even looking at immigration issues that can make life more difficult for international students.

Q6: Is it right that civil society organisations - from charities and campaigning groups to community groups, bloggers and think tanks - should seek to influence the policy positions of political parties, elected politicians and candidates? If so why?

Yes, as I previously stated these organisations give voices to those who otherwise would be voiceless. They also organise groups who wouldn't have the resources to organise themselves on their own. This makes society fair as often these are groups who are discriminated against or need support the most, or causes that wouldn't have the attention without these organisation, so without civil society organisations these groups and issues would struggle to get themselves put on party's agendas.

Q7: Is it right that voters should understand politicians' policy positions and what civil society think about these positions? Or would that information unduly influence voters?

Voters should certainly understand politicians' policy positions as this enables them to have an informed vote. Civil society promoting candidate's positions just creates more transparency and enables voters to vote for a candidate/party whose stance they agree with. Ironically this was used to benefit political parties in the past- for example the Lib Dems proudly signing the tuition fees pledge, and letting this get promoted. The same could also be true about other parties aligning themselves with causes, however now that it's backfired (in the case of the Lib Dems and tuition fees) and has led to negative attention, they no longer want to "play the game".

Q8: What principles should the regulation of campaigning activity ahead of elections be based on?

It should ensure clear transparency, so no organisation has any hidden ulterior motive.

It should make sure that organisations campaign on issues that match their charitable objectives/their cause, and make sure that no organisation uses campaigns to vent the political opinions of staff.

PAGE 3: The existing law

Q9: What transparency is needed in relation to donors who give money towards a campaign run by a civil society organisation? (e.g. size of donations that should be made public, timescale ahead of elections, whether donations explicitly for election-related campaigning should be published or all donations to organisations that campaign ahead of elections)

Donations for election-related campaigning the year before an election should be published, donations to organisations that campaign ahead of elections shouldn't have any extra restrictions as there's a risk that this could deter some donors who prefer to remain private. Unsure of what the limit should be.

Q10: Are you concerned about any current lack of transparency about campaigning activity by civil society organisations ahead of elections or the money that funds them? If so please give an example.

I think there needs to be transparency in money that's given to campaigns, as it would go against all the reasons I gave that civil society organisation campaigning is important if rich donors could anonymously bankroll a campaign. This could also lead to party-donors funding campaigns that supported a certain party.

Q11: Should the regulation of campaigning activities by civil society organisations be based on regulation for political parties? (Eg. Should spending limits for be based on a percentage of political party spending? Should definitions of campaigning activity be based on that of political parties? If so, why?)

No, this would lead to far too much administration for small organisations who can't afford the staff time/don't have the resources to do this. It'd also be incredibly hard to police before an election.

Q12: Do you think the existing law regulating civil society campaigning ahead of elections works, or are changes needed? What changes, if any, would you propose and why?

I'm not very clued up on the existing laws regulating civil society campaigning, however this is because our organisation's activities don't currently come close to breaking any regulations (as we use NUS and other unions as a benchmark). This in itself probably suggests that the regulations work for us, as we're currently fulfilling our aims but remain within the law.

Q13: 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 your organisation's plans for the next General Election, or on campaigns you ran at the last election.

It would affect us greatly as, I'm lead to believe, it would mean that devolved nations would be capped at £35,000 for spending on a coalition of organisations campaigning on the same issues. Whilst we're a very small organisation, we work a lot with NUS Scotland and other SU's in the run up to an election, and NUS Scotland alone will spend over £35,000 on staff and resources, meaning that they'd have to limit what they could supply us with, and we wouldn't be able to spend any money, just to be within the threshold. Also, we don't have any staff dedicated specifically to campaigning, and as we'd be nearing the £2,000 spend mark (which would mean we would have to report to the Electoral Commission), we'd have to constantly monitor our spend and staff time in minute detail. Whilst we are careful to remain within the law as it is, we couldn't afford the administrative time to measure our every activity in the build up to an election on a monthly, then weekly basis. As well as this we don't have anyone with sufficient legal/political knowledge to fully understand what we'd be measuring, so we may have to send members of staff on some sort of training.

I also have concerns how this'd affect our work in the build up to the independence referendum and general election, as the referendum falls within the 12 month build up to the election. Similarly, I'd be interested as to how this impacts on the referendum campaign funding.

PAGE 4: Impact of the Lobbying Bill Part 2 - case studies

Q14: Are there specific examples of campaigning activity that you have planned, or that has happened in the past, which: a) could not happen under the Lobbying Bill, or which you think would be affected b) would be much more difficult under the Lobbying Bill c) you would be deterred from carrying out for fear of coming close to or falling foul of the law

Working with other SU's and NUS would be more difficult during the election as we'd struggle to monitor what was being spent, so if other organisations spent recklessly we'd face punishment just for being involved with the campaign.

We'd have a lot of concerns over any campaigning activity in the run up to the election as we wouldn't know what we'd have to record/report and what we wouldn't, for example hustings, putting up posters from NUS campaigns, inviting candidates onto campus. We'd also worry that if one candidate withdrew from an event it'd look like promoting a certain candidate (who turned up), and we'd suddenly have to record all the expenses that went into that event.

Overall we'd be deterred from engaging in most forms of campaigning activity as we don't have the knowledge or experience of what we'd have to report to the commission. We also couldn't afford, time-wise, having a member of staff dedicated to reporting this.

Q15: Do you agree with the new expenditure threshold for third parties registering with the Electoral Commission? (£5,000 in England, £2,000 in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales) If not, why not? Do you have any suggestions for what the thresholds should be?

Absolutely not, £2,000 including staff for a Scottish organisation is very little- it's also very difficult to measure as our staff have diverse remits so we'd have to log hours spent on a campaign, then work the cost of that. As well as this coalitions of organisation will easily spend over £2,000, and if that means that each of us has to register to be a part of a coalition then we'd be forced not to participate in the campaign as we don't have the facilities needed for this.

Q16: Do you agree with the new limits, including staff costs, on non-part political spending in the 12 months leading up to an election? (£320,000 in England, £35,000 in Scotland, £24,000 in Wales and £11,000 in Northern Ireland) If not, why not? What do you think the limit should be?

No, again £35,000 is barely one member of staff alone for some organisations. For smaller organisations like ourselves the staff costs would rarely reach this limit, however I know organisations we work in coalition with would reach this without taking our own, smaller, staff costs into account.

We're also unclear as to what staff activities would need to be taken into account, and whether that's a full year of a campaign staff members salary, or only for hours spent on issues.

Q17: Do you agree with the limits on constituency spending as set out in the Bill? (£9,750 per constituency in the year before an election) If not, why not? What limits do you think would be appropriate?

No, some constituency's naturally incur more costs. Whether it's because of a denser population or because there are increased travel costs for more rural areas.

Q18: If your organisation is based in Scotland, Wales or Northern Ireland, what do you think the particular effects would be on your campaigning activity ahead of elections? You might want to consider the implications for devolved administration elections and any differences in how civil society engages with politics and democratic processes.

It'd involve even more administration as in Scotland we have local elections, European elections, Scottish Parliament elections and General elections so essentially every year is an election year and would require restriction, which seems unfair.

Q19: Do you think there should be a pause in the passage of Part 2 of the Lobbying Bill? If yes, why? How long do you think a pause would be needed?

Yes, to allow the government to clarify a lot of the areas that are causing confusion, or remove it. This would also mean that the crucial first part, however weak it may be, will be less likely to be opposed.

Unsure of how long, but at least 6 months so there can be a full, detailed, consultation.

Q20: If this Bill passes, do you think the Electoral Commission should consult civil society before drafting guidance? If so how would your organisation expect to be consulted?

Definitely should as it's us who it affects the most.

We'd expect face to face focus groups with ourselves and other organisations, like the Commission did

Q21: Please share any other thoughts your organisation has for the Commission on Civil Society and Democratic Engagement.

The bill is far too vague and restrictive, it feels rushed and there was not enough consultation.

As a small organisation we wouldn't automatically assume we'd need to register, however after talking to more people it seems that by participating in coalition campaigns we would have to register, which we don't have the expertise to do effectively. Even without this we'd be affected as we spent in the area of £2,000 so we'd be constantly on edge that we'd go over the lower threshold.

As we're small and don't have anyone dedicated to campaigns, and our staff time is so precious as we're spread out, I really feel that this bill hits small organisations disproportionately hard.