

Online-VOTERS

More Centralisation?

Is the Home Office being helpful to Local Authorities? It seems to be when one first reads about VOTERS (Versatile Online Total Electoral Registration System) a new package being developed by LAMSAC (Local Authorities Management Services and Computing?) the semi-autonomous body funded by local government. This "total" system is being developed to provide local councils with a system which will keep voting/property lists up to date, will print voting cards and registration lists, jurors lists, Registrar-General's statistics, etc. It will work on any machine and if any changes occur in electoral law updates will be provided.

At present each local council has its own system (usually written in the treasurer's department) and there is a wonderfully British lack of cooperation between council's on the formats, types of data held and so forth. Indeed, until recently, many council's electoral roles were not computerised at all. Thus VOTERS seems at timely contribution to economy and efficiency. In addition it provides statisticians with a far more efficient sampling frame than the old paper lists.

Why then has the impetus for VOTERS come from the Home Office and not the local authorities? After all SASPAC (another LAMSAC product) came about because OPCS could or would not supply a decent Census Analysis Package and so local authorities each contributed to its production. Am I being paranoid when I believe that there could be sinister reasons behind the Home Office's involvement? It would be very easy to pass legislation forcing council's to pass their VOTERS files to government. Then illegal immigrants could be sought by finding houses with no voters in areas with many foreign surnames. Comparisons could be made with the Postcode Address file to investigate voterless houses. The files could be "run against" the National Police (sorry!, Police National) Computer.

Of course all voters lists are public. And modern Optical Character Recognition techniques mean that anyone, by buying printed lists from all authorities, could technically produce a national file of electors. But isn't VOTERS so much more convenient?

Comments please.

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