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Submission to An Coimisiún Toghcháin

I am writing in response to your Draft Research Programme 2024-2026. I welcome the opportunity for stakeholders to comment on the Research Programme before it is finalised. I am making this submission based on my own research experience, in particular research I have conducted over the last decade exploring the use of various types of independent commissions in peace processes societies, including Northern Ireland. This research has provided me with the opportunity to examine the structure, work, and public perceptions of a range of commissions, and to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of utilising these types of bodies as part of public administration. While the peace process context is different than the one in which the An Coimisiún Toghcháin operates many of the questions that arise from this research remain applicable and given that this research was publicly funded through a number of Irish Research Council grants it is important that insights from this research are available to public bodies, such as this Commission, to inform their work.

The proposed body of research covers many of the most pressing issues around the administration of elections in Ireland and as such is to be supported. In particular focusing on questions of inclusion and participation, and how groups that have experienced marginalisation from electoral politics can be supported is of central importance in strengthening our democracy.

However, there is an additional area of research that I feel the Commission should consider including in its research programme. To understand electoral administration we must examine the role of those institutions involved. The Commission itself is now the central public institution administering elections in Ireland and as such examining its role is of upmost importance. There are a number of different areas that would be included in such an examination, each employing different methodologies.

Firstly, a comparative study of the powers and structure of An Coimisiún Toghcháin would involve comparing the Commission with other commissions from a range of different

geographic contexts. Here case selection of the other commissions to which An Coimisiún Toghcháin would be compared is key. Including different individual commissions that carry out the full range of functions assigned to An Coimisiún Toghcháin would be particularly informative. Such a comparative study would establish how the Commission relates to other similarly tasked bodies, and importantly highlight potential strengths and weaknesses based on the experience of other commissions.

Secondly, how the Commission is perceived will be crucial in terms of its ability to successfully conduct the extensive range of functions for which it has been made responsible. As such there is a need for research that explores public perceptions of the Commission's work. Including questions about how individuals perceive An Coimisiún Toghcháin in surveys that the Commission conducts itself or commissions would be a useful first step in gaining such insights. However, *how* such attitudes are being shaped is also a key concern. Using discourse analysis, research would examine how the use of language, across a range of communications, both from the Commission itself and media sources, informs how the Commission and its work is perceived. Establishing a comprehensive media monitoring system to regularly assess how An Coimisiún Toghcháin is covered in print, broadcast, and online media would facilitate this research, as well as being useful to the Commission for other purposes, for example, allowing it to act quickly to correct misrepresentations or inaccurate reporting.