

**CHAIRMAN'S SPEECH**  
**PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION 2010**

Good evening ladies and gentlemen.

Once again it is indeed a great privilege for me in my capacity as Chairman of the Elections and Boundaries Commission to address a few remarks to you on the eve of yet another Parliamentary election in Trinidad and Tobago.

It is the fifth such election in less than ten years; my second as Chairman in just over four; and it came like the proverbial bolt from the blue. Perhaps in the face of such unexpectedness it may not be inappropriate to remind you that as a citizen of Trinidad and Tobago your **democratic** right affords you the singular, supreme, personal power and authority to select the political party of your choice; a party to form a government capable of conducting the affairs of the country; and to do so not exclusively in the name of the party or of its interests; a party to govern not in the name of some, but in the name of an united sovereign people of Trinidad and Tobago without distinction of any kind whatsoever be it on the ground of race, colour, sex, religion, language, political affiliation, sexual orientation, social status, property, ability or disability; in short, *toute le monde*.

And yet I do not think it is generally understood or appreciated even at the highest levels of government that democratic elections constitute the *terra firma*, the bedrock if you will, upon which are erected the institutions and mechanism of governance, namely the ministries and state organisations.

The centerpiece of the Commission's constitutional mandate is the authority to provide all who are registered to vote with the opportunity to exercise that democratic right and to do so by conducting national elections in Trinidad and Tobago to the highest standards of impartiality, - at least we try - consistent with the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, and unfettered by considerations of any kind that would corrupt, impair or compromise that impartiality.

So far I have used the adjective *democratic* three times; its parent noun democracy means among other things – and here I am quoting, with minor amendments, from the Oxford Dictionary – it means “control of a group (the Government if you will) by (and I emphasize **by**) the majority of its members namely (the citizens). Majority is not my word it is the lexicographer's. And that control is exercised through elections. It is the responsibility of all eligible electors to play their part in seeking to achieve that objective.

When one considers the struggles of our forefathers to achieve universal suffrage in Trinidad and Tobago, one cannot help but be astonished by the seemingly casual regard paid by its beneficiaries namely ourselves, to the upkeep and maintenance of that precious, inalienable and unalterable right. Or to put it another way in the form of a question: were the manes, that is the deified souls of our ancestors, the likes of such as Mzumbo Lazare, Maresse-Smith, Captain Andrew Cipriani, Albert Gomes, Uriah Butler and Cola Rienzi to name a few; were their stars to shine on us now, would they be satisfied that we have matched our political manhood and womanhood, I hasten to add, to their measure, their labour, their sacrifice and their

vision? Maybe a part of the answer can be found in the following interesting statistic. Since 1961, of the estimated total of approximately eight and three-quarter million eligible voters in twelve parliamentary elections, only just over five and one-half million, equivalent to a weighted percentage of roughly sixty-four, availed themselves of the franchise. Roughly three and a quarter million all told, simply did not care! You might say they just went along for a free ride. They preferred, it seems, to remain outside the sphere and to be powerless rather than to stay inside and exert influence. I would contend their squander of the franchise is a matter of more than academic interest: is it disaffection, dissatisfaction, discontent or what with the system? Shouldn't we try to find out why this is so? I say definitely more than academic interest because these and other reasons could ultimately impair and bring into question the legitimacy of the very democracy we are expousing.

Tomorrow every one of the record number of one million plus persons on the list of registered voters among whom are nearly 450,000 ladies and 440,000 gentlemen and which number include roughly 150,000 persons within the ages of 18-25 will have the opportunity to exercise the control to which I alluded earlier. We must do our best to keep democracy alive!

Now, let me very quickly give you a mental image of the scope of the undertaking for which the Commission is ultimately responsible and upon which the Returning Officers commanded by His Excellency the President and appointed by the Commission, and the multitude of poll-day staff, are about to embark. For the forty-one (41) constituencies there are one thousand, four hundred and seventy-two

(1,472) polling divisions. The polling stations established therein are normally sub-divided where the need arises into units of not more than 600-700 electors per station, so there are 2,156 such stations. Election-day staff comprising persons assigned to duty in and at polling stations including Information Officers, and others such as Roving Officers and police officers could total anywhere in the vicinity of thirteen thousand to fifteen thousand.

Given the hype of the current election campaign there is the likelihood that political parties, candidates and others could, in the prevailing atmosphere of expectation, try to push the limits of acceptable behaviour beyond the norm in search of every possible advantage. I therefore now, as I always do on these occasions, appeal to all political parties and their candidates, activists, supporters and well-wishers to co-operate fully with the Commission's poll-day staff and with the law enforcement authorities in promoting a peaceful election environment, free from annoyance or obstruction or illegal activity, thus protecting the security and integrity of the democratic process. We all seek the same things and entertain the same hope but prize above all else peace and tranquility, don't we?" In the outcome, after the hurly burly, the rule of law above all else must prevail out of respect for the expression of the popular will whatever that might be. Therefore I say to all do not let the thirst for power intoxicate your passions and emotions to a state of lawlessness.

Viewers would recall that a CARICOM Electoral Observer Mission came here for the general election of 2007 on the invitation of the Honourable Prime Minister of the country, with a mandate like that of all such observer missions, regional or

otherwise, as stated in the Declaration of Principles for International Election Observation, namely to enhance the integrity of election processes by making observations and collecting and analyzing data with the objective of determining whether the election was conducted in a manner free and fair and without fraud. To cut a long story short, they not only expressed satisfaction with the way the election was conducted but also made a number of useful recommendations for improvement concerning which the Commission has since taken steps to implement. We welcome the CARICOM Observer Mission. But remember there is even a more important observer. For those who have a sense of moral guilt, I am referring here to the “All Seeing Eye”, the Third Eye as it is sometimes called, the eye that observes all actions that may be hidden from the eyes of man; and judges them *in foro conscientiae*, in the court of conscience.

I would now like to refer to some important housekeeping matters. Political parties should cease their campaigning activities at 12:00 midnight tonight. It might not be inappropriate at this stage to remind you that it is an offence for persons except those who are waiting to vote, to “..... assemble or congregate in a polling station or within 91 metres or 100 yards thereof.” Similarly “.....no person shall, in any polling station or upon any road or in any public place within 91 metres or 100 yards of any polling station seek to influence any elector to vote.” The politicking must end at midnight tonight.

Poll cards were mailed to all electors. A poll card is an important document which contains your polling station number and its address. As many of you may know such information is readily available at the EBC’s web-site [ebctt.com](http://ebctt.com). Take your

poll card and your identification card with you to the polling station. However if you did not receive your poll card in the mail one will be prepared for you at the polling station. Avoid voting late. Go early and do not allow any political party activist to scare you or to turn you away from your polling station on the bogus advice that your name is not on the list of electors. If in doubt, consult with the Information Officer assigned to your polling station. A word of caution: when you are about to enter the voting booth you will be required to place your cellular phone or camera in a container located outside it. On your way out you can retrieve your phone/camera. Employers are reminded to allow all electors in their employ two hours off in addition to the normal mid-day meal-hour for the purpose of voting during the hours of the poll tomorrow.

To the Commission's election officers comprising the Chief Election Officer, Deputy Chief Election Officer, Assistant Chief Election Officer, Returning Officers, Election Clerks, Presiding Officers, Poll Clerks, Registration Supervisors, Registration Officers, Assistant Registration Officers and others including Field Investigating Officers and officers of the Police Service, I say do your utmost to perform your duties impartially and fearlessly, with integrity, zeal, respect and efficiency and support your colleagues in the discharge of their various duties.

To all the candidates, I say good luck. Remember that your candidature imposes upon you the responsibility to respect the rights and freedoms of others and to avoid violence or intimidation or disturbance of any kind.

And finally to the voters I say: on your marks, get set ..... cast your vote!

Good night.

N J MASSON

Chairman

**20<sup>th</sup> May 2010**