

CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS

ON OCCASION OF DISTRIBUTION OF PRESIDENTIAL WRITS OF ELECTION TO RETURNING OFFICERS FOR THE PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION TO BE HELD ON MONDAY 7TH SEPTEMBER, 2015

I have addressed Returning Officers many times before and from current observation, it appears that the individuals here today comprise in large part those whom I had spoken to before. That notwithstanding, I think that it is still necessary, I should think mandatory, to stress the highly responsible role you, as Returning Officers play in the electoral process. Bear in mind that you are a public official under the command of His Excellency the President of the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and accordingly must project or try to project an image of competence and capability. And you have to do this under pressure.

Your Presidential mandate requires you to possess a high visibility coefficient as it were, in the electoral process since you have to interact courteously with election candidates and voters. As you are well aware an election is an event of daunting and demanding logistical complexity and one which, for those of you who worked as Returning Officers before, undoubtedly tests a Returning Officer's organisational ability to its limit. Some of the crucial activities concerning the implementation of which you demonstrate this ability is in the establishment of office accommodation at a location approved by the Commission and also appointment of an Election Clerk which is subject to the same condition of approval; and the publishing of election notices in the press. In the past many Returning Officers have secured accommodation and appointed Election Clerks without the Commission's approval. I urge you to comply with the provisions of the Representation of the People Act, Chapter 2:01 (ROP) and proceed in accordance with the proper procedures in order to avoid conflict.

Another very important quality which was part of the construct of criteria on which your selection was based is that of impartiality. Your job inevitably brings you into close contact with candidates and electors. You have to deal with political parties as well. Not only must you be impartial you must, by your actions, be perceived to be so. And you cannot be impartial during working hours

and be Janus-faced while being involved in party political activity after that when you are behind the green door.

Another important criterion employed in the selection process was your ability to communicate orally and in writing. Your job requires you to communicate, as alluded to before, with candidates, voters, political parties, and to which I now add poll-day staff and the media. And here again, tact and courtesy are essential qualities. At some stage Returning Officers must make themselves available to meet and communicate with their Presiding Officers, the managers of the polling stations under their remit. I think this is especially important. You would need to impress upon Presiding Officers, the need to set up their polling stations well in advance of its opening and to open them promptly at six o'clock. After his assignment as Returning Officer for the Chaguanas West Bye-Election held in 2013, Mr. Everil Ross submitted a report to the Commission in which he reported on a number of observations related to the proceedings on election day and he also made a number of suggestions for, to quote his own words, "improving the smooth running of the election process". Copies of Mr. Ross's observations and suggestions are available from the Chief Election Officer. They were also given to Mrs. Wright who is entrusted with the training of poll day staff.

While on the subject of communication I would like to let Returning Officers know of an improved method of communicating results on election night which is being proposed by De La Rue our IT Technology provider. When the proposal has been ironed out, I am sure that the Chief Election Officer will arrange a meeting with you all to explain the details. Remember that whatever the procedure for communicating results, an accurate Statement of the Poll is the dominant determinant and Returning Officers should ensure that their Presiding Officers are adept at completing those Statements in a timely manner. The rational approach here is by example. I understand from reports in the media that Commonwealth Election Observers are going to be here and I know that they will pay particular attention to this aspect of the electoral process.

On election night polling agents and others would doubtless be regularly transmitting information about votes cast for candidates to radio and TV stations. That is unavoidable. However, it is only after you as Returning Officers have "... received the duplicates of the Statements of the Poll from the polling stations ..." for your Electoral District, that you can announce the total votes recorded for each candidate in the Statement of the Poll. Remember that those votes

constitute a Preliminary Count. Ascertainment of the votes cast for each candidate can only be done by you when by 12 noon on 8th September 2015 neither a candidate nor his agent requests you to conduct a final count. In those circumstances you shall then declare in writing the name of the winning candidate and give to each candidate a copy of the declaration.

Some of you may remember in my address to you on the occasion of the distribution of Writs for the 2007 Parliamentary Election I referred to those persons who have no recognition of sin, persons to whom sin is just an illusion, those who have no sense of moral guilt and who will do anything to corrupt the electoral system in order to achieve their goals, come hell or high water. One of the possible ways it has long been theorised is that fraudulent voting can take place by means of a so-called revolving ballot: voting based on a ballot paper issued to a special elector. So Returning Officers, ensure that in the training of poll-day staff you emphasise that only ballot papers correctly folded and bearing the initials of the Presiding Officer or his or her nominee are placed in the ballot box. If the ballot paper has the initials of any other person, then the Officer-in-Charge of the ballot box should refuse to allow it to be placed in it and immediately inform the Presiding Officer.

Another matter I always draw to the attention of Returning Officers who in turn must inform their Presiding Officers and in particular the Officers-in-Charge of the ballot box is that voters must be made to immerse their finger down to the quick – you know down to the tender flesh below the growing part of the fingernail – before placing the ballot in the ballot box; not the other way round. Mr. Ross suggested a return to the receptacle with the ink and sponge but observation showed that persons merely rested their finger on the sponge and after leaving the polling station, rubbed the partially-stained finger on the ground, thereby removing the mark and thereafter claiming to the world that the ink was no good.

There is much more I would like to say but I am sure that Commissioner Charles whose remit it is to lead this training seminar, shall provide, in comprehensive detail, all that you need to know to perform your job efficiently. This training session is a historical one because for the first time in EBC's history we have associated with it a consultant from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Mr. Deryck Fritz who is a fellow citizen and who at one time worked with the Department. On your behalf I extend a pleasant welcome to him.

Finally, I urge you ladies and gentlemen, Returning Officers all, to maintain the highest principles of integrity and probity in the execution of your duties and to do everything possible to produce a free, fair and believable election come 7th September next.

Thank you for your attention.

21st July, 2015