

## **PARLIAMENTARY ELECTION 2010**

### **CHAIRMAN'S ADDRESS TO RETURNING OFFICERS ON THE OCCASION OF THE DISTRIBUTION OF WRITS OF ELECTION**

I make bold to say that no one in this room would have anticipated that a parliamentary election would have been called two years and six months before it is constitutionally due in 2012. But, such is the uncertainty and unpredictability of the mad, mad, mad world we are living in today.

Some of you may remember the foreboding words of the first Prime Minister of Trinidad and Tobago many years ago when in referring to a pending parliamentary election said that "it will come like a thief in the night".

No truer words could be said of the General Election 2010, and the jolting reminder that we in the Elections and Boundaries Commission must always be in a state of preparedness, "to be ready like Freddie" as the saying goes.

The cumulative experience of those of you who have served as Returning Officers over many years, is a source of great comfort to the

Commission. Bolstered thereby, we are sanguine that the conduct of the elections will be in safe, reliable and competent hands.

To the few who are serving in the capacity of Returning Officer for the first time, I say follow closely today's training session, and the instructions and guidance of your more knowledgeable supervising officers.

The Commission is well aware of the enormity of the task you have undertaken to perform. But let your watchword be *nil desperandum*: do not despair. Be strengthened by the realization that you constitute as a group one of the main pillars, one of the principal guardians of our democracy.

The Presidential Writ which you shall receive in the course of today's proceedings commands each and every one of you: "... to cause a poll to be taken ... on 24<sup>th</sup> May 2010 and that you do cause the name of such member when so elected to be certified to the Chief Election Officer not later than the seventh day next following the declaration by you of the result of the poll."

Causing a poll to be taken involves a host of activities for the myriad political scene. You have to assist in the selection of polling stations in

the polling divisions of your electoral districts. You have, very importantly, and crucially to play a part in the recruitment, training, and selection of poll-day staff; to emphasise in the training that polling station staff or perhaps I should say the polling station team must ensure that voters are able to cast their ballots in secret, free from influence and in a calm atmosphere. You have to collect the working tools – the materiel as it were – from the Chief Election Officer and distribute them to your polling stations; and for the obverse of that function. Another crucial function is the monitoring of polling stations, which means in effect that you have to maintain regular surveillance of them. Finally as stated earlier you are responsible for declaring the results of the poll.

As I just alluded to it, pay particular attention to the selection of poll-day staff. No doubt, in the sessions to be presented by the Chief Election Officer and his staff the relevant details would follow. However, permit me just a few minutes to draw to your attention the following.

- ✓ The Presiding and Deputy Presiding Officers you select must be capable of organizing the layout of their polling stations and to liaise with the key-holder of the polling station in advance so that the

station can be opened promptly on time; who can be polite and professional in dealing with voters, candidates and agents; who would be able to account and be responsible for ballot papers; who can ensure that proper procedures are followed for voting; who can ensure that candidates and agents or anyone else do not interfere with the voting process; who can ensure that all signs and notices are clear and visible; and who are likely to be able to maintain order in the polling station.

- ✓ Similarly in the case of Poll Clerks, choose only those who understand and agree that first of all they are members of a team and as such must assist the Presiding and Deputy Presiding Officers in the organization and layout of the polling station to which they are assigned. Choose those who like their Presiding and Deputy Presiding Officers must be polite and professional in dealing with voters, candidates and agents; who would be able to act impartially at all times; who will be able to check and mark electoral numbers in the register of electors; who will ensure that voters cast their ballots in secret; who will maintain the secrecy of the ballot at all times; and who can answer voters questions where appropriate, in a friendly

and profession way. In short ladies and gentlemen, select intelligent people; they may not necessarily make the highest marks.

When I addressed Returning Officers on the occasion of the distribution of Writs for the 2007 Parliamentary election I made reference to the scam of the so-called revolving ballot associated with special voting. Since then the Commission took action to modify the procedure for special voting which essentially entailed avoidance of sending ballot papers through the mail. About three weeks ago we received a draft of the new Rules but as a consequence of the snap poll they cannot be put into effect at this time. I would just like the staff doing the training to pay particular attention to the fact that since in the existing arrangement the ballot papers would have been marked with the initial letters of the Returning Officers who issued them in the first place, it behoves the election officer in charge of the ballot box i.e. the Ballot-box Poll Clerk to ensure that the ballot paper of an elector voting in a regular polling station should bear only the initials of either the Deputy Presiding Officer or his nominee and not those of a Returning Officer or anybody else's.

Of course this means that in the training sessions of both the Trainers of the Trainees and of the Trainees, special attention must be paid to

the relevant aspects of the voting procedures. Emphasise also that each digitised elector must insert his or her right index finger in the electoral ink before being allowed to insert the ballot into the ballot box. Avoid the shallow receptacle with the sponges. Later on in these proceedings Mr. Gregory Mendes, a Security Consultant will bring to the attention of Returning Officers a number of “red flags” on the election highway.

You would recall that in the feedback exercise which the Commission conducted after the last general election you made a number of suggestions and recommendations. We were able to implement some of them but not all. Hopefully we shall implement all in time for the Local Government election whenever it is called.

I end by calling on all of you to affirm your loyalty to the Republic of Trinidad and Tobago and to justify your appointment to the high office of Returning Officer. Do your duty without partiality, fear, favour or affection and without malice and ill-will to anyone. And remember: *“Nil illegitimi carborundum”*.

N. J. Masson  
Chairman

**19<sup>th</sup> April 2010**

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