

CHAIRMAN'S REMARKS

AT MEETING WITH RETURNING OFFICERS ON FRIDAY 11TH OCTOBER, 2013

AT THE MANNY RAMJOHN STADIUM

IN CONNECTION WITH THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTION 2013

1. Introductory remarks
2. I apologise for taking you away from your busy schedule of pre-election day activities but I thought it appropriate at this time to say a few words to you.

On Wednesday 24th July 2013, mere days before the Chaguanas By-election, I was asked by the Chief Election Officer, Mr. Ramesh Nanan to address the poll-day staff for that event; in short to deliver a 'Pep Talk'. While it would be somewhat physically impossible for me in current circumstances to do the same for all poll-day staff before the October 21st election, I thought it might be useful to bring to your attention, as I did on the 24th July, a few tidbits related to polling station activity which you might deal with during your 'Pep Talk' next Wednesday 16th to the poll-day staff within your remit.

The Writ of Election issued to you by the President of the Republic commands you "to cause a poll to be taken" for a Local Government Election on 21st October. The Commission wants to provide all the support we can muster to enable you to execute that mandate.

I am sure that it is a matter of concern to all of us that a newspaper should publish an article under bold banner headlines: "**EBC Slammed**" and with

sub-title “**Badly-trained Returning Officers**”. I am not casting aspersions on anyone. Rather my purpose is to boost your confidence and to lend support to your final briefing with poll-day staff. In that regard, here are some points of interest.

You should remind your Presiding Officers, Deputy Presiding Officers, Poll Clerks and Officers-in-Charge of the ballot boxes to revise over the few days before the election, even before you meet with them next Wednesday, pages 8 through to 15 of their *Manual of Instructions for Polling Day Staff*.

The Manual encourages Presiding Officers to set up their polling stations on the day before polling day. But more than once, I have been to polling stations one o'clock in the morning of polling day and found that that advice was not heeded. You should emphasise this point in your discourse. On the night before polling day, polling stations should be in a state of total readiness. To leave delivery of essential materials, polling-station set-up and checking that all materials are present and that all necessary equipment are in working order to last-minute attention can court disaster. Polling stations should be checked thoroughly for the presence of political-propaganda materials that could influence the electorate. Such materials should be temporarily placed in storage. Very importantly, Presiding Officers should be reminded that polling stations must open promptly at 6:00 a.m. on polling day.

You should emphasise to the poll-day staff that while their stations are in operation, their business is to ensure that all electors are provided with efficient, courteous and high-integrity service and that stations should be

managed so as to reduce waiting time in the queues and while casting the vote, and very importantly to ensure ballot secrecy at the time of casting the vote. Presiding Officers should also caution their staff on the use/abuse of their cell phones during the day.

As you know, the procedures in a polling station may be broken down into five (5) routines:

- i. Controlling elector entry and ensuring a smooth flow of electors, to which I have already alluded;
- ii. Accurate checking of each elector's identity and eligibility to vote;
- iii. Efficient issue of ballots and casting of votes;
- iv. Providing information in a pro-active manner and where required assisting electors to exercise their franchise; and
- v. Redirecting appropriately, electors who are apparently not registered to vote at your polling station.

Remind your Presiding Officers that after the last voter has cast his or her ballot and they have announced the close of the poll at precisely 6:00 p.m., all persons in line at that time must be allowed to vote. After the last voter has gone, Presiding Officers must undertake a thorough reconciliation of voting materials. I strongly recommend that you urge Presiding Officers to refer to Chapter 9 of the *Manual of Instructions for Polling Day Staff*. The procedures are perhaps the most disliked aspects of the tasks of Presiding Officers but nonetheless very essential. I am referring here to counting of ballots and completion of the Statement of the Poll.

You would recall when I spoke to you in Chaguanas on Monday 16th September this year I made reference to a list of suggestions in relation to *Close of the Poll Proceedings* made by Mr. Everil Ross, Returning Officer for the Chaguanas By-election. Mr. Ross also proposed a *Close of Poll Check List*. I have copies of both documents here for anyone who is interested.

Remind Presiding Officers that apart from ensuring the state of readiness and the opening of their polling stations on time and supervising the various procedures to be followed in the polling stations, during voting and at the end of voting after which they close their stations, that they are also responsible for the security of their polling stations. Electors expect polling stations to be run in a calm and orderly manner. This is associated with standards of appearance. The atmosphere in the polling station should be businesslike and friendly and very particularly, polling day staff should dress accordingly. Any jerseys, pins, badges, slogans, colours or doodahs that might bring the impartiality of the polling-station staff into question must not be worn.

Presiding Officers must also be told that they are responsible for maintaining order in their polling stations and that they have the power to order a person's removal from the polling station and also to order their arrest. But let them know however that it is the Police Officer who has the power to arrest, not them.

Given the existing thoroughly overheated and over-saturated electoral environment it is likely that during the course of polling-day, polling-station staff would encounter voters who have a difficult disposition. In such

situations my advice to poll-day staff is to listen to the voter. And it is good practice for them to look the person in the eye while he or she is speaking; this will demonstrate the poll-day official's interest. Also, let the person know every effort is being made to understand the problem from their perspective; this should help to emphasise that an informed decision is being considered, following which a response should be given and the reason for it. Above all, and under no circumstance should poll-day staff become engaged in an argument.

Now to my favourite and this should be directed to the Officers-in-Charge of the ballot boxes. Stress that a voter must immerse his or her index finger in the electoral ink; not merely rest the finger on the surface of the ink but to dip it down to the quick. And it is only after this is done that the ballot may be placed in the ballot box.

Now, a word on maintenance of the polling station. Remind the Presiding Officers that they are the General Managers of the polling station and that they should check the polling station regularly to ensure that:

- voters have unimpeded access at all times;
- the markers on the floor delineating the **green** and **red** lines are kept in place;
- signs and notices are in plain sight and not defaced or damaged;
- the entrance to the polling station is not blocked; and,
- where ramps are provided that they are firmly in place.

The Local Government Election 2013 is an historic election from many points of view but its efficient implementation, as in the case of other elections, requires a high standard of professionalism in terms of compliance with the Rules and regulations of the Representation of the People act on the part of the members of the Elections and Boundaries Commission, the staff of its Department, Returning Officers, Poll-day staff and all the other agencies of the State and otherwise who play a part in the project. The objective of my brief session with you today was merely a spur to the attainment of that standard.

If anyone of you requires any further assistance in connection with the execution of your mandate, please let the Chief Election Officer know as soon as possible.

Thank you very much ladies and gentlemen.

10th October, 2013