



PRELIMINARY STATEMENT ISSUED BY THE CARIBBEAN COMMUNITY (CARICOM) ELECTORAL OBSERVER MISSION TO THE GENERAL ELECTIONS IN ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA, 23 MARCH 2004

The presence of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Electoral Observer Mission in Antigua and Barbuda arose from a request from the Government of Antigua and Barbuda to monitor the General Elections held on Tuesday 23 March 2004. In response, the Caribbean Community agreed to mount a nine-person Electoral Observer Mission.

The principal tasks of the Observer Mission were to monitor the preparation and organisational arrangements for the conduct of the General Elections, the electoral process, including the voting process and the counting of the ballots, and to assess the outcome of the Elections.

In pursuing those functions, the Observer Mission met with His Excellency The Governor General and held discussions with the Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections, Leaders and representatives of the political parties in Antigua (the Antigua Labour Party and the United Progressive Party) and in Barbuda (Barbuda Peoples Movement and Barbuda Peoples Movement for Change), representatives of the business community and civil society, the Antigua Christian Council, the Commonwealth Observer Group, and the Media.

On Polling Day, eight members of the CARICOM Observer Mission were deployed in Antigua and one in Barbuda. Members of the Mission observed the delivery of ballot papers to Presiding Officers, the opening and closing of the Poll at selected Polling Stations, and the transportation of the Ballot Boxes to the Counting Centres as well as the counting of the ballots.

The CARICOM Observer Mission has therefore been afforded the opportunity to carefully examine the preparatory electoral arrangements and to make a reasonable assessment of the electoral process. A full report of the Mission's findings and recommendations will be submitted to the CARICOM Secretary-General.

The Observer Mission's preliminary assessment of the preparation for the conduct of the Elections is that the arrangements were generally adequate, given the constraints of limited time and limited resources available to the Electoral Commission and the Supervisor of Elections. Those mitigating factors helped to create some level of dissatisfaction with the performance of the Electoral Commission, particularly in relation to the Commission's response to the major issues in the General Elections, namely the overly bureaucratic production and distribution of ID cards and the Register of Voters used in the Elections.

It was felt by representatives of the various stakeholders that greater effort could have been made towards addressing those critical issues. In addition, the view was expressed that proactive efforts could have been directed to the timely introduction of regulations concerning the use of the Media, voter education, and timely dissemination of general information to the political parties and the voting public.

The Mission concurs with the sentiments expressed by stakeholders. However, the Mission is of the view that despite such evidence of frustration, the Elections were conducted in a peaceful and fair manner and were relatively free of violence, despite the fact that political parties did not adhere to the agreed Code of Conduct published by the Christian Council.

Voters turned out in large numbers and were not discouraged by the inclement weather during most of polling day. Voters were generally able to cast their ballots without intimidation and hindrance, although a few Polling Stations opened later than the specified time of six o'clock thus engendering frustration on the part of some voters. Generally, the voters were orderly and exercised patience. In the case of disabled voters and members of the armed forces, these persons were accorded some preference upon arrival, as required by the regulations.

With regard to the operations of Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks, the Mission was impressed with their efficiency, professionalism and courtesy which were no doubt influenced by the training programme organized by the Elections Commission. In general, voting procedures were followed, with minor variations and very few infractions. Transparency of the voting process was ensured and the secrecy of the ballot was respected.

The Police Officers, on duty at the Polling Stations, were helpful and assisted in the organization of queues. The Officers ensured the security of the Polling Stations, and the peaceful and orderly conduct of the Poll. The Observer Mission is also indebted to the Commissioner of Police for the security facilities accorded the Mission.

The Observer Mission commends the people of Antigua and Barbuda for the maturity shown in ensuring that the General Elections were conducted in a peaceful manner and in an environment conducive to the free expression of the will of the voters. The results of the General Elections clearly reflect the will of the people.

The Mission is of the view that the very high turnout of voters also reflected a firm commitment by the people Antigua and Barbuda to the democratic and electoral processes. Such commitment could be enhanced by an adequate voter education programme; a highly transparent process in the recruitment and selection of electoral officials; increased confidence in the role of the Electoral Commission by strengthening its independence; and introduction of regulations concerning campaign financing.

The CARICOM Electoral Observer Mission takes this opportunity to express thanks to His Excellency The Governor General for the courtesies extended to the Mission. The Mission also expresses thanks and appreciation for the cooperation and support received from Government Officials, particularly in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Police, Leaders and representatives of political parties, the business community, civil society, other Observer Missions and the Media. Above all, the CARICOM Mission extends sincere gratitude to the Supervisor of Elections and the Electoral Commission for their contribution to the electoral process.

CARICOM Electoral Observer Mission
St John's ANTIGUA AND BARBUDA
24 March 2004