



THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY
AT THE COMMONWEALTH CLUB



**THE ROYAL COMMONWEALTH SOCIETY
&
THE COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION
UK BRANCH**

**COMMONWEALTH OBSERVER TEAM
TO THE UK GENERAL ELECTION 2010**

FINAL REPORT

OBSERVERS

Parliamentarian Observers

- Bangladesh – Hon. Sheikh Fazle Noor Taposh MP
- Ghana – Hon. George Boakye MP
- Jamaica – Ms Lisa Hanna MP
- Kenya – Hon. Ababu Namwamba MP
- Malaysia – Hon. Chua Tee Yong MP
- Rwanda – Hon. Jeanne d'Arc Uwimanimpaye MP
- Sierra Leone – Hon. Marie Marilyn Jalloh MP

Civil Society Observers

- Electoral Assistance Bureau of Guyana – Gino Persaud
- Malawi Electoral Support Network – Aloisious Nthenda
- Transition Monitoring Group of Nigeria – Innocent Chukwuma
- Centre for Monitoring Election Violence of Sri Lanka – Dasanayake
Dissanayake

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

The UK General Election in 2010 was the first time outside Observers were able to apply for accreditation and observe the UK electoral process. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK Branch and the Royal Commonwealth Society brought an Observation Team of seven parliamentarians and four civil society officials from across the Commonwealth to the UK to observe the Election. Following briefings in London the Team split into smaller groups and observed polling and elections in four constituencies; Morecambe and Lunesdale, Rochford and Southend, Glasgow South West and Birmingham Yardley.

The aims and objectives of the Observation Team were to:

- Gain insight into the electoral processes of the UK
- Share lessons from their own countries
- Suggest recommendations for improvement

By bringing the first Observer Team from across the Commonwealth to undertake an small but objective observation of a UK General Election, the RCS and CPA UK were encouraging sharing of best practices and promote greater dialogue between member nations in anticipation that such exchanges serve to improve electoral processes and benefit the progress of modern democracy throughout the Commonwealth.

In any election process the basic ingredients are the right to vote; universal, equal suffrage and to ensure that eligible individuals can cast their vote in a secret ballot in a free and fair process. The Observation Team generally was impressed by the conduct of the election and felt it was undertaken in a fair and free manner. In particular the Team were impressed by the culture of **trust and honesty** that pervaded the entire process and the calm and civilised way in which campaigning, voting and the counting of ballots was undertaken. The Team was of the view that this was an aspect of the British system that younger democracies could aspire to develop in their own political societies.

Although the Team came away with the positive view that the UK election process produces results which reflect the will of the people, the Team observed that the system itself contains vulnerabilities that make the system *corruptible* and open to fraud. The UK electoral system operates under trust; it is assumed and understood that both voters and officials are honest and do not have plans to defraud the electorate. Because of this vulnerabilities have not been addressed and may not be recognised as weaknesses in the system. Trust may have been a sufficient anchor for the system in the past, but while trust is good, caution and deterrent controls are better.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT

- Identification of voters should be improved – for example through the use of identification at the point of registration, the use of identification at polling stations and markers to indicate that people have voted.
- Indelible ink pens rather than pencils should be available for use in all polling stations.
- There should be a better process of verification of postal ballots in order to close the loopholes in the system. While the Team welcomed postal voting as a method to enable more people to vote, Team members felt that the system remained vulnerable, despite recent changes in Electoral Law.
- Political engagement with the public, particularly with young people, should be developed more. It should be asked why there appeared not to be the level of enthusiasm among young people about politics and voting as is found in other parts of the world.
- There should be an increase in the numbers of staff in polling stations. Staff should be rotated so that long hours are avoided and people are able to access facilities.
- It was observed that in some polling stations ballots were treated casually, which could compromise the secrecy of the process; the system should be reviewed to ensure that ballots are not left unattended.
- Councils should try to centralise their software to enable them to collate the electoral rolls. This would help to prevent the registration of voters in more than one constituency. A central

electoral roll might also assist with the development of electoral rolls that contained individual identifiers such as photographs, signatures or voter number.

OVERVIEW OF OBSERVATIONS

The choice of constituencies enabled the Observer Team members to view the election in a cross-section of the country; urban and rural, coastal and central, within the responsibility of a devolved legislature (Scotland), and to see all three main parties campaigning. The Observers visited 63 polling stations and due to centralised counting they witnessed the counting of election ballots from 21 constituencies. This was a small team of observers and although every effort was made to ensure as broad a cross-section of the UK Electoral Process was observed as was possible, the report does not claim to provide a comprehensive analysis of the electoral process. However, it does provide important insights based on observations of experienced individuals.

Trust. The Team was surprised and impressed by the culture of **trust and honesty** that pervaded the entire process, and the calm and civilised way in which campaigning, voting and the counting of ballots takes place. This was evident throughout the UK electoral process; it is trusted that voters are honest about their identity, that officers can be trusted when left alone with ballot boxes, and that there will not be interference with the ballot. However, because of this there is a ‘casual’ attitude surrounding the process that leaves it vulnerable. While the system is not corrupted it is certainly *corruptible*. Trust may have been a sufficient anchor for the system in the past but while trust is good, caution and deterrent controls are better.

Registration. The Observers did not observe the process of registration first-hand, but spoke to a number of voters, election officials and experts regarding the system. The Observers were of the view that registration could be improved through centralisation of the electoral roll and the use of personal identifiers when registration takes place. They observed that the current system of household registration was vulnerable because the process relies on the ‘head of household’ to complete the registration forms which can result in eligible voters not

being included; those who move often are at a disadvantage; and the lack of centralisation could result in voters being registered simultaneously on two different electoral rolls. While the 'rolling' system of registration was welcomed as it enabled more people to register in time to vote, it caused challenges for Councils in meeting the high number of applications submitted close to polling day.

Postal Voting. The Observers viewed the entire verification and counting process of postal ballots in a number of constituencies. With over 7 million people voting by postal ballot in 2010 postal voting has clearly become an entrenched part of the UK electoral system. This was welcomed as an excellent way to enable people to vote who may not have been able to do so otherwise. However the process of postal voting was particularly vulnerable to abuse because there was no verification of identity at the point of application, and where they were crosschecked the verification of identifiers was undertaken by just one Council Official. The vulnerabilities of the postal voting system were highlighted for the Observers by confirmed cases of fraud through postal ballots in the 2005 election and indications that there were investigations into similar incidents during the 2010 election.

The Poll. The staff at polling stations consistently undertook their duties well and were helpful to voters throughout the voting process. The Observers viewed 63 polling stations across the four constituencies and saw the process of opening and closing of the polling stations. The Observers were of the view that the polling stations they observed were understaffed with just two staff per polling station who covered the poll for the full period of 7.00am until 10.00pm. This issue could be rectified by changes to how the stations are staffed.

The Count. The count was well managed in all of the constituencies that were observed. With both the poll and the count the security of the ballot was not a priority due to the culture of trust throughout the process. The Observers were satisfied with the level of visible security as it was not felt that an overt security presence was required; it was also clear that should Police assistance be needed it would have been available quickly.

Comparisons with other Electoral Systems. The Observers were impressed by the calmness and culture of trust that pervaded the process and believed it was a positive element of the UK system that they would like to replicate in their own countries. Methods developed recently by the Electoral Commission to boost registration and engage with younger voters (for example through online registration, advertisements and other web-based engagement strategies) were also seen as examples of practice that could be replicated elsewhere.

THE VALUE OF THE COMMONWEALTH

The Commonwealth is a forum where countries can share experiences and learn from each other. Election Observing programmes bring out the true value of the Commonwealth; a family of nations that champions the democratic process. The Team members wished to emphasise that their visit to observe the UK elections was in this capacity as fellow members of the Commonwealth of Nations. One Observer noted that what happens in developing democracies, for example Kenya, is of concern to the UK as it is to Jamaica, Malaysia or Nigeria as fellow members of the Commonwealth family; and what happens in the UK should similarly be of concern to all within the Commonwealth.

The Royal Commonwealth Society. Founded in 1868, the RCS conducts a range of events and activities aimed at promoting international understanding. Its educational, youth and cultural programmes include one of the world's oldest and largest schools essay competitions, and an innovative international youth leadership programme. HM Queen Elizabeth II is Patron and Peter Kellner is Chairman. Headquartered at the Commonwealth Club in London, the RCS has some 4000 members in the UK and a presence in 40 Commonwealth countries through a network of branches and Commonwealth societies. <http://www.thercs.org/>

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK is one of over 175 branches of the CPA – the professional association of all Commonwealth parliamentarians. CPA UK's membership is made up of Members from both Houses of the United Kingdom Parliament who work to strengthen parliamentary democracy. CPA UK conducts international parliamentary outreach on behalf of Parliament and the wider CPA by parliamentary diplomacy and parliamentary strengthening activities to contribute to the capacity of partner parliaments. <http://www.cpaukbranch.org/>

The Commonwealth. The modern Commonwealth was established with 8 members in 1949. In 2010, it has 54 members with a total population of nearly 2 billion. It is an association of governments and peoples, built around shared language, institutions, challenges, aspirations and values. The Commonwealth promotes democracy, development, and diversity within its member countries and across the world.

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