

**Report On**  
**GENERAL AND MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS**

**Held on Wednesday, March 5, 2003**

**By: I. Myrtle Palacio**  
**Chief Elections Officer**  
**April 2003**

**I. INTRODUCTION**

1. The primary sources for this report are my observations as Chief Elections Officer (CEO), briefings and discussions with Officers-Police and Public Officers, meetings with candidates and their agents, written and verbal reports from Returning Officers, evaluation meeting with Returning Officers and reports from staff of Elections and Boundaries Department.
2. By law, Wednesday, March 5, 2003 was scheduled as the date for Municipal Elections. As it is, this would have been the first time that both City and Town Council Elections are held on the very same day. Also it was the first time that a second City was included. Already this was a **double** election to prepare for.
3. On Friday, January 24, 2003, Prime Minister, Hon. Said Musa, as is his prerogative, announced the date of the impending General Elections, to be held also on March 5, 2003. This announcement meant that **three** not **two** elections would be held on the same day-never before attempted in Belize, and a first for the Caribbean.

**II. PREPARATION**

4. One of the disadvantages of being a government department is the limited human resource for the level of flexibility expected of the Staff. Compounding this is the stark reality of the tensions caused by our unique working environment-the **only** department whose primary customers are the past, present and future employers. A two day staff retreat was held in December 2002 under the theme: "**Rounding The Bend: Maintaining Change**". The main objective was to continue the staff empowerment process by boosting self-confidence, ensuring team focus and enthusiasm, in preparation for Elections 2003. With the assistance of facilitators from the Public Service Union, Public and Private Sectors, 5 topics were reviewed. These were, Team Building, Conflict Management, Organizational Change, Leadership and Customer Service.
5. The Election was organized and implemented by a small administration namely, the Chief Elections Officer, an Assistant who is relatively new to the department, one Secretary and one Receptionist. Strategies were put in place on Saturday, January 25, 2003, which included the following:
  - Floor plan to accommodate a **double** election in one Polling Station
  - Coopt other skills through other government departments
    - Public Relations
    - Trainers of Election Workers
    - Staff of Municipal Bodies and others to:
      - Scout and assess Polling/Counting Stations countrywide
      - Assist with the setting up of Polling and Counting Stations
    - Other support staff-1 Secretary and 1 Administrative Assistant

- Identify and recruit additional Election Workers
  - Organize training of Election Workers
  - Expand on training sessions and training packages
6. The 29 Electoral Divisions are further subdivided into 131 Polling Areas (Appendix i). Some 44 Polling Areas would experience **double** elections, including 23 in Belize City. Utilizing barriers, the strategy was to physically divide a Polling Station into two units to allow for 2 elections-Municipal (Town or City) and General (Appendix ii). Each of the Polling Stations would accommodate 2 sets of election workers, one for each election, namely: 1 Presiding Officer and 1 Poll Clerk for Municipal Election, 1 Presiding Officer and 1 Poll Clerk for General Election. One Assistant Poll Clerk would check the binders at Polling Stations with dual elections. The counting of ballots was to be conducted simultaneously at separate Counting Stations for Municipal and General Elections. Most Polling and Counting Stations were the traditional school buildings, community centres and other public buildings (Appendix i).
  7. Two ballot papers of the same style and format utilized at Municipal Elections 2000 and General Elections 1998, were utilized. Two different colour indelible inks and fingers were used. The forefinger was dipped in violet colour indelible ink as an indication that one had voted in the General Election, while the middle finger was dipped in rosé colour indelible ink for the Municipal Election. For quick and efficient movement of electors, the number of Polling Stations was increased to more than double that of 1998. Also, more polling booths were recommended (Appendix i) for Municipal than General. This was under the assumption that voting for Municipal would take a longer time than for the General Election.
  8. A total of 1,432 Election Workers (Table 1) were recruited as Returning Officers, Election Clerks, Poll Clerks, Assistant Poll Clerks and Counting Clerks-567 for Municipal and 865 for General Elections.

**Table 1**

<b>Post</b>	<b>Municipal Election</b>	<b>General Elections</b>
Returning Officers	9	29
Election Clerks	9	29
Assistant Election Clerks	1	17
Presiding Officers	158	274
Poll Clerks	158	274
Assistant Poll Clerks	158	-
Counting Clerks	74	232
<b>Total</b>	<b>567</b>	<b>855</b>

Election workers are mandated with the conduct and management of elections on Election Day. Returning Officers, Election Clerks and Assistant Election Clerks are the general administrators, and as such are charged with all management responsibilities, including the proper supervision and guidance of staff, namely, Presiding Officers, Poll Clerks, Assistant Poll Clerks and Counting Clerks. The CEO communicated with these administrators via: 3 meetings/workshops, memoranda, individually by telephone and/or face-to-face discussions, briefings on the 3rd and 4th March. Election administrative staff was increased for the first time, to have, Assistant Election Clerks for Belize City and for all rural constituencies. A list of Returning Officers and Election Clerks is attached at (Appendix iii).

9. For efficiency, ease and transparency of counting, Returning Officers were provided with guidelines and forms including (Appendices iv - vi):
  - Counting of multiple boxes simultaneously
  - Reconciling and counting at the same time by setting aside ballots in batches of 25 (General), solid ballots for Municipal
  - Pre-printed tally sheets to tally split votes in the Municipal Elections
  - Maximum number of ballot boxes to count simultaneously
  - Maximum number of agents in Counting Room
  - Examples of rejected and good ballots
10. Two Statutory Instruments were signed as follows:
  - Statutory Instrument No. 14 of 2003-to remove restriction to the close of registration caused by Nomination date for General Elections. This allowed voters to register up to the 10th day of February 2003
  - Statutory Instrument No. 43 of 2003-to allow for more counting agents for General Elections
11. Two meetings were held with members of the Commission in February and March regarding Plans for the Elections including:
  - Layout of Polling Stations with dual Elections
  - Election Administrators-Returning Officers and Election Clerks
  - Tentative list of Polling Stations
  - Preparation of the electoral role

Handouts were distributed by the CEO who requested the full support and assistance of Members in effecting a smooth, efficient election.

12. Two consultations/briefing sessions were held with Secretary Generals of the People's United Party and United Democratic Party, Representatives of Independent Candidates, and Independent Candidates themselves. They were given the same handouts as the Commission Members and Returning Officers, including memoranda regarding the counting policy etc. (Appendices iv - vi).
13. At the last meeting, Commissioners and Candidates/Party Representatives were invited, in separate groups, to inspect the new ballot boxes and the locks. A staff member demonstrated this.
14. Two sets of electoral lists were utilized-one consisted of all electors to January 2003 (January List) and the other (February List), electors registered in February 2003. Three hard and one electronic copies of the list were delivered to the People's United Party and United Democratic Party, and three hard copies to the Independent Candidates in their areas of interest. These were distributed on the following dates:
  - United Democratic Party-Wednesday, February 26, 2003
  - People's United Party-Thursday, February 27, 2003
  - Independent- Thursday, February 27, 2003

The Supplementary Lists for February were hand-delivered to both PUP and UDP on February 15, 2003. Final Revision day for the February List was February 28, 2003; not including four appeals received forty-eight hours later. Both the People's United Party and United Democratic Party received the February Lists on Monday, March 3, 2003, with the exception of Dangriga, which were distributed on Tuesday, March 4, 2003 (Ref. Paragraph 22).

### **III. INFORMATION DISSEMINATION**

15. For the first time, Manuals were produced and distributed to Election Workers, as well as

Political Agents of the two major Political Parties. Some 1,500 Public Officers were trained during 22 workshops conducted countrywide.

16. Information was shared with the Commissioner of Police and his Assistant during four briefing sessions, including a three hour discussion with all Senior Police Officers and the Chief Executive Officer, Ministry of Home Affairs. Proxy papers and other handouts, such as a list of Polling Stations were distributed.
17. Extensive voter information was conducted commencing February 1, 2003. These were designed to:
  - o be Progressive-from the general to the specific
  - o utilize a mix of methods
  - o use of 3 popular languages-Spanish, English, and Creole
  - o use of different types of media

Table 2 demonstrates the topics for some of the messages presented to the Public.

**Table 2**

Voter Information	Media Used
How to Vote Qualification for Candidacy One and Ten One and Six Notices: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Time and Date of Nomination</li> <li>• Notice of a Poll</li> <li>• Notice of Assigned Colours</li> <li>• Description of Polling Areas</li> </ul>	Television, Radio, Newspaper, Website Newspaper, Website Radio and Television Radio and Television Newspaper, Radio

18. The Chief Elections Officer participated in six radio and television Talk Shows on KREM and LOVE FM. Two of these included the participation of the Chief Executive Officer, Ministry of The Public Service, The President of the Public Service Union, and the President of the Association of Senior Public Officers.
19. The Chief Elections Officer was invited to address the student body of St. John's Jr. College in Belize City on Tuesday, February 25, 2003.
20. The Website [www.belize-elections.org](http://www.belize-elections.org) was updated to include copies of:
  - o Publications-3 brochures, Booklet: "**Selecting Our Leaders Past and Present**", the Manuals mentioned in paragraph 15 above
  - o The layout of the floor plan, with animations demonstrating how to vote in two Elections
  - o Statistics on the electoral population
  - o Map of Belize showing 29 constituencies, with hyperlink to other data
  - o A list of the Polling and Counting Stations
21. The following was done to keep stakeholders abreast of the Registration and Revision processes:
  - o Extended services to PUP and UDP by hand-delivering monthly Supplemental and

- Revised Lists-from September 1999 to February 2003
- Conducted 4 workshops under the theme "***National Dialogue for a Culture of Democracy***", for Media, Civil Society Organizations, Political Agents and Church Organizations

#### IV. SOME CHALLENGES

22. There were challenges that occurred very near to Election Day that could have adversely affected the efficient administration of the elections. These included:
  - Aberrations in the system
  - Non-availability of vehicles
  - Inadequate telephone system
  - In-availability of **staff lists**
  - Registration constraints
23. Investigations conducted at the Dangriga Office on March 2, 2003 uncovered a box containing 271 unprocessed Record Cards for February. These were brought to Belize City for the necessary processing. If these were not discovered and processed, it is highly likely that these persons would not have been able to vote. The cards were processed in time, but not without unnecessary hardships and anxieties on all involved.
24. Of the 188 vehicles requested from the Vehicle Care Unit (Appendix vii) only 58 were actually available on March 4, 2003. Notwithstanding Circular No. 3 of 2003 from the Ministry of Finance, some Public Officers refused to surrender vehicles in their charge, causing unnecessary hardships to some Returning Officers and Election Clerks.
25. Some 17 (20%) of cellular phones issued to Returning Officers and Election Clerks, malfunctioned on Election Day. So did land phones at 21 Polling Stations. This adversely affected communication for the posting of data to the website. Subsequently, CEO advised Returning Officers to communicate the hourly statistics to media houses in their districts, for wider distribution of information to the Public.
26. There is **not one arm** of government empowered to compile a complete list of persons paid from the public purse. A staff list of Public Officers was last updated in 2000 by the Ministry of The Public Service. Even if the list was current, it would not reflect all Public Officers for various reasons. Elections and Boundaries Department reverted to requesting staff lists through individual Departments and Ministries. However, some of the lists received were also not updated to reflect the present situation of individual Departments. As a result, the initial letters of appointment sent, and subsequently the list of staff submitted to Returning Officers included a large percentage of persons who could not be found; for reasons ranging from, resigned to study leave. Therefore, the appointment of Election Workers was not timely and also time consuming.
27. Allowing for electors to register up to the 99th hour is a great advantage to the Elector and the Politician. For Electoral Administrators it is a nightmare. In the situation for February 2003, the February List could not be completed until after February 28 and in some cases, due to pending appeals, 2 days after Revision date. This does not give adequate time to properly process and prepare lists to satisfy the demands of some Candidates and/or Political Parties.

#### V. ELECTORAL LIST

28. The population of the electoral roll at February 2003 was approximately 126,000, representing 91% of voter age population. Approximately 11,000 persons registered in the last two months, January and February 2003. This is equivalent to a full year's workload.
29. The table at Appendix viii demonstrates annual growth of the electoral roll by electoral division. The large growth and decline reflected in Stann Creek West and Toledo East

Divisions respectively, in December 2002, are due to the recent boundary changes. The table also demonstrates 0% growth in Collet for December 2001 and negative growth (-1.1%) for December 2002.

30. The range in growth of the other 26 divisions is from 3.2% for Mesopotamia to 15.3% in Lake Independence. Four electoral divisions demonstrate double-digit percentage growth namely:
- Belize Rural North - 10.4%
  - Belize Rural South - 11.0%
  - Queen's Square - 13.4%
  - Lake Independence - 15.3%

Of the 4 divisions, Queen's Square stands out as unusual, primarily because it lacks the land space for growth as the other 3. For January and February 2003, the growth ranged from 4.1% to 14.3% for Orange Walk South (Appendix viii).

31. The electoral roll at February 2003 represents an increase of approximately 32,000 or a growth of 33% over 1998.

## VI. ELECTION DAY

32. For all staff members, Election Day commenced at 5:00 a.m. on March 5, 2003 and for 5 of us at the Central Office, concluded March 6 at 9:35 p.m. This meant working over 40 hours non-stop. The workload ranged from:
- Manning telephones
  - Cooling hot spots
  - Responding to queries
  - Replenishing supplies
  - Reassuring
  - Being the general information center
  - Inputting statistics to the website maintenance

Notwithstanding voter information asking voters to ensure where to vote before Election Day, most queries were from those who went to the wrong Polling Station. Queries came via the telephone, e-mail, as well as face-to-face visits to our Offices countrywide.

33. Polling Stations were opened on time. I polled some Returning Officers and others called in between 6:30 and 7:30 a.m.. In Belize City, I visited 6 divisions-3 north side and 3 south side prior to the opening of polls. I assisted in re-arranging the desks to the illustration recommended in the Floor Plan for a better flow of traffic. Although all polling stations were pre-arranged for the Election Officers, there were those who re-organized the Polling Stations to suit the **"old"** way. This only occurred in Belize City.
34. In Belize City the lines were long at most polling stations by 7:00 a.m. I assisted the Election Clerk to organize lines prior to the commencement of polling at Sister Clara Mohammed School, Polling Area No. 20, Port Loyola Division.
35. I observed the opening of polls at the Customs Building, Polling Area No. 22, Port Loyola Division. Not all scrutinizers were in place, but voting was orderly. The orderliness continued countrywide throughout the day. Whatever hiccups occurred earlier were reconciled by mid-morning. One pocket of verbal violence came from one Polling Station in Lake Independence at the close of polls, but common sense prevailed and the Police intervened.
36. The first result for General Election (Pickstock) came at approximately 10:00 p.m. By 12:45 a.m. the 21st result heralded 15 seats for the People's United Party, an indication that the PUP is to form the next Government. This was verified and officially announced by the CEO

at 1:10 a.m.

37. Election results for all 7 towns were announced by 3:42 a.m. The two Cities-Belize City and Belmopan, were unusually slow in their counting process for several reasons. The CEO dispatched fresh counters to assist on Thursday morning to both Counting Stations. Belmopan City called in the official result around 10:30 a.m. on Thursday morning. The Returning Officer for Belize City hand delivered the official result on Friday morning around 10:45 a.m.
38. Voting was free of violence, and the transition to a new government was smooth as is the culture of Belize-3 in one day for 2003.

## VII. POST-ELECTION

39. The Department received commendations from international, as well as national sources, ranging from well wishers to those who have monitored elections in other countries. This came via e-mail, telephone calls and letters. Several e-mail letters were received from Belizean Americans and students abroad.
40. There was one area of criticism/condemnation from the Guardian Newspaper of Sunday March 16, 2003, some 11 days after Election Day. The Guardian is the official organ of the United Democratic Party. The article on page 9 entitled "***The Worst Managed Election Ever***" was written by the Editor Mr. Herbert Panton. Mr. Panton is also a member of the Elections and Boundaries Commission. However, the Elections and Boundaries Department did not see nor hear from Mr. Panton before, during or after the Elections to offer assistance, caution or advice in his capacity as a member of the Commission. His criticism, which the Department considers was without any basis, has to be seen in the context of the prevailing political atmosphere in the country.
41. Presently the Department is still in post-election mode as there are several duties to complete before going back to what is perceived as normal. Therefore, the schedules are still abnormal. The hardest is the time consuming auditing of the electoral list against record cards to ensure 100% accuracy after binders were returned by the Election Workers.
42. To date **not one** single petition/challenge to the three Elections has been presented, not even a recount. There is confidence in the electoral process. The will of the people was expressed in free and fair and free from fear elections on Wednesday, March 5, 2003.

## VIII. ELECTION RESULTS

### **GENERAL ELECTIONS**

43. Of the 29 Seats in the Parliamentary Elections, the People's United Party (PUP) garnered 22 and the United Democratic Party (UDP) 7 (Appendix ix). Some 79.51% turned out to vote represented over 100,000 electors. The seventeen independent candidates cumulatively received 1.26% of the votes. Mr. Wilfred Elrington (Independent) garnered more votes than an opponent from a major Political Party (UDP). This is the second such occurrence in Belize; the first being the Elections of 1954 in the Belize Rural constituency. The PUP garnered 52.75% of the votes and the UDP 45.22%. Although there were 3 elections, the number of rejected ballots was minimal. At 0.77% it is comparable to other elections, including 1998.
44. The 79.51% turnout is extremely high compared with '84, '89 and '93 (Appendix x). Twice when there was a **new** Electoral List in 1979 and 1998, were the only times that voter turnout was over 80%. At 1979 it was 89.78%, but 5 years later at 1984, it was down to 74.93%. In 1998 there was a new Electoral List and voter turnout was 90.14%. At 2003

turnout was 5% higher than in 1984.

### **MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS**

45. This was the second election for leaders of the City of Belmopan. Voter turnout was 70.69%, with 0.10% rejected ballots (Appendix xi). The PUP won all 7 seats with Mr. Anthony Chanona re-elected as Mayor. The PUP garnered 53.33%, the UDP 34.10%; and the 5 independent candidates 12.57%. Voter turnout was slightly higher than that of the 2000 elections, which was 69.51%.
46. For the first time Belize City Council Election was held on the same day as the Town Council Elections. As mentioned earlier (paragraph 36) the tally of the result was unusually long. The PUP won all 11 seats and Mr. David Fonseca was re-elected as Mayor. The PUP garnered 54.78%, the UDP 44.18% and the three Independent Candidates 1.04%. Voter turnout at 69.61% for 2003 is approximately 12% higher than the voter turnout for the 1999 elections.
47. Of the 7 towns, PUP captured 4 and UDP 3 (Appendix xii). The number of seats won is as follows:
  - o People's United Party - 29
  - o United Democratic Party - 20

In the Town of San Pedro Ambergris Caye, voters elected a politically mixed Council-6 UDP, one PUP (Ms. Merlene 'Mel' Spain). The elected Mayors, including the first female, are listed below (Appendix xii).

<b>Towns</b>	<b>Mayors</b>
San Pedro Ambergris Caye	Elsa Paz
Benque Viejo del Carmen	Said Badi Guerra
San Ignacio/Santa Elena	Alfonso Cruz Jr.
Dangriga	Cassian Nunez
Punta Gorda	Carlos Galvez
Orange Walk	Henry Castillo
Corozal	Mario Narvaez

### **IX. RECOMMENDATIONS**

48. Policies:
  - o Use of government owned vehicles for election and emergency work takes priority once those responsible are informed
  - o One arm of government to be charged with the updating and maintenance of a list of **all** workers paid from the public purse. All Departments/Ministries to submit updates on a quarterly basis. This list is to be shared with all Departments and Ministries at least twice per year.
  - o Training in and responsibility for election work to be ongoing. Training may be included in seminars/workshops conducted or approved for or by the Public Service; and for all levels in the Public Service.
  - o All Senior Officers to be aware of the responsibility to manage elections. Once appointed, the tasks involved automatically take priority.
  - o All Public Officers, including Teachers, to be aware of the responsibility to conduct elections
49. Telephones to be installed/issued some 48 hours before Election Day
50. Three buildings that are not conducive as polling stations:
  - o Customs Bond Warehouse, Port Loyola

- Sister Clara Mohammed School, Port Loyola
- San Pedro Roman Catholic School, San Pedro Ambergris Caye

Three Polling Areas require Public Buildings as Polling Stations:

- No. 94-Dangriga Electoral Division
  - Nos. 6 and 7-Pickstock Electoral Division
51. Upgrade/empower Elections and Boundaries Department to deal directly with other government bodies. This is already occurring informally, but needs to be formalized.
- Empower Elections and Boundaries Department to take appropriate action against Public Officers who refuse to perform election duties.
  - Empower Elections and Boundaries Department to strengthen capacity for elections without having to go through the regular hierarchy e.g.:
    - Approval for hiring temporary staff
    - Co-opting existing staff from other Ministries
    - Budget submission to go directly to the Ministry of Finance

Myrtle Palacio