

Chapter 3

Preparations for the Elections

The Common Roll

The registration of qualified voters is acknowledged to be the cornerstone of a credible election. The integrity and adequacy of the electoral roll is fundamental to democracy. Without a credible roll all the further expense, efforts, preparations and activities for the poll and count amount to nothing for unregistered voters. They are effectively disenfranchised. We believe that Papua New Guinea's Common Roll deserved greater attention, time and resources than seem to have been devoted to it during the past 15 months.

The Electoral Commission's registration programme for the general election scheduled for 1997 began in May 1996. Its funds for the 1996 part of this programme amounted to some K3 million. The programme included an information and awareness-raising campaign underlining the legal duty to register, and sought to inform and motivate citizens throughout the country. The campaign was mainly conducted through the Press and on the radio. There were some problems because several provincial radio stations, which as noted later rely for funding on the provincial authorities, were out of action. However, the National Broadcasting system was available.

In the main urban centres the Commission employed students as well as staff made available by the national and local authorities. In the rural areas Village Recorders and the local District and Provincial officials were used. We were told that the enumerators were instructed to use the 1992 Roll as the basis of their work, make door-to-door visits in whichever area they were operating and list any other qualified persons whom they found. The lists were to be consolidated and given to the Returning Officer for ultimate transmission to the Commission in Port Moresby. There they would be fed into the computers and new rolls produced.

It was not clear whether in fact rolls produced as a result of this process were always returned to their places of origin for inspection and possible objection well in advance of the immediate pre-polling period.

The Group was informed that in some areas the enumerators were faced with refusal to register and often with threats of violence. We



On show at the show ... specimen ballot papers, posters, leaflets and other voter education material at a special Electoral Commission booth at the Port Moresby Show, a popular event in Papua New Guinea's cultural and entertainment calendar

were told that this was because the people were angry at not having received adequate services from the national and local authorities since the previous elections. Our own inspection of registration figures on the eve of polling indicated dramatic reductions between the numbers of voters listed in the first enumeration, as compared with those confirmed on the second, checking, survey. It was explained that many who had been registered initially were found later not to have been resident where they claimed to be, to be unknown or not to be qualified on residential grounds.

We were informed that the roll would be set out in alphabetical order according to place of residence – villages in rural areas, lots and streets in the towns.

The Electoral Commission had a difficult task in seeking to achieve efficient and effective registration. The population is unevenly spread, the terrain of the country is difficult and road communications are under-developed. (For example, there is no road from the capital Port Moresby to any provincial capital.) These practical problems appear to have been exacerbated by financial, management and organisational shortcomings, some of which arose from ineffective delegation and over-centralisation.

We were told that there were also shortcomings in the enumeration process, in particular that there was too little face-to-face contact. There also appear to have been problems in the collection of data and printing. It has been suggested that in future more direct and personal methods of registration should be used and that, despite the expense, each voter should be issued with a Voter ID card bearing her/his photograph. We learned that in 1991 Parliament had legislated for such a system. The Supreme Court declared this to be unconstitutional. Such a system could be beneficial and with adequate advance planning and due regard to the Constitution it could be implemented. A number of Commonwealth countries use such cards, linked with a computerised register, and we understand that this can speed the voting process, provide an additional safeguard against double-voting and other abuses, promote face-to-face registration and create greater confidence in the system.

Candidates and Political Parties

A much-remarked and widely criticised feature of elections in Papua New Guinea is the very large number of candidates and, within this, the large number of independents. For the 1997 general election there were over 2,300 candidates in all – the highest total since independence and 40 per cent more than in 1992. Only slightly over 700 were endorsed by political parties. There were an average of 22 candidates per seat and one electorate in the Northern Province would be contested by no less than 61.

There is no requirement for political parties to register with the Electoral Commission. However, in order to contest an election they are required to register as corporations. The Electoral Commission is not involved in and has no control over this process.

We noted the sometimes vigorous debate in Papua New Guinea concerning the political parties. The Westminster parliamentary system, a form of which is used in Papua New Guinea, is based on a strong party system. However, as noted earlier, the party system in Papua New Guinea is relatively weak. Loyalty is essentially to the clan or to the individual rather than to the party. Many MPs, both independents and those notionally linked with a particular political party, are ready to desert to another group. Such shifts in the allegiance of individual MPs result in frequent changes of government and are criticised by many in Papua New Guinea who see this as a major defect and an obstacle to good government. As indicated earlier, the Constitution has been amended to restrict the use of the vote of confidence mechanism. Although seen elsewhere as a guarantee of accountability, many in Papua New Guinea do not regard this mechanism in this way. We believe that there are other means of discouraging defections, such as a law requiring that MPs who cross the floor must submit themselves to a by-election.

In an attempt to strengthen the party system a private member's bill was introduced in 1993. It proposed a number of reforms. These included the registration of political parties by the Electoral Commission, public funding, transparency concerning donations and accountability for and limits on election expenses. The breach of election expenditure limits would have been made a ground for disputing the result and severe penalties would have been imposed. The bill



Air power ... helicopters were used to transport election equipment and polling officials to remote areas, as here in the Eastern Highlands

did not become law. However, there is still widespread concern in Papua New Guinea about the numbers of independents and their role in the formation of governments. Proposals of the sort considered in 1993 are still being widely discussed and we hope that parliament will give them serious consideration in future as a possible means of strengthening the political party system.

Voter Education and Training of Officials

The Electoral Commission began its voter education campaign in February 1996 with a six-month campaign on the national television channel, EM-TV. This was intensified in June 1996, supplemented by a church campaign. The Commission also produced a range of posters, booklets and other publicity information. We believe that such voter education (and ongoing civic education) is of the greatest importance and should be enhanced in future.

The Electoral Commission produced a training manual for polling officials explaining the election law and how it should be implemented. It dealt comprehensively with preparations for the elections; procedures for setting up and operating the polling booth; the various stages of the elections; the finalisation and closing of the poll; and procedures for the security of the votes and materials. It was difficult to gauge the effectiveness of the Commission's training and whether it was provided in good time. However, we were able to observe some training sessions at the Electoral Commission headquarters and in the provinces. The techniques varied from somewhat formal lectures with only a small hands-on element to very lively participatory instruction incorporating simulations.

Preparation of Ballot Papers

The ballot papers were printed by three separate private printers in Port Moresby. Because of the large number of candidates the ballot papers were in many cases very large. The paper

quality was of good, but not bank-note, standard. The late delivery of and/or the submission of inferior quality photographs by candidates led to problems in the production of some ballot papers. It was proposed that in future it should be insisted that proper photographs should accompany nomination papers.

Security

This matter was taken extremely seriously by both the Electoral Commission and the police. Plans for the deployment of police and soldiers to parts of the country where violence had occurred at election time in the past were drawn up early and well publicised. The actual deployment was also widely advertised and it was made clear that violence would be dealt with firmly.