

# **EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT**

## **REPORT**

**on**

**the European Parliament mission to observe the parliamentary elections**

**in Solomon Islands,**

**1 to 9 December 2001**

**Members of the EP delegation:**

**Mr John Corrie  
Mr. Gerard Collins**

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25 February 2002

## **I - Introduction**

At its meeting of 25 October 2001, the Conference of Presidents (the leaders of the political groups) of the European Parliament decided to send a delegation to observe the Parliamentary Elections in Solomon Islands scheduled for 5 December.

The political groups subsequently nominated Mr. John Corrie, UK, and Mr. Gerard Collins, Ireland, as members of this delegation.

They were accompanied by Mr. Richard Wester, a parliamentary official with the Committee on Development and Cooperation.

The delegation would like to express its sincere thanks to the staff of the European Commission, Mr. Anthony Crasner (Commission Head of Delegation in Port Morsby, Papua New Guinea) and Mr Tom Leemans (Resident Advisor at the EC Office in Solomon Islands, without whose invaluable assistance the success of the mission would not have been possible).

It should be noted that the decision to send observers followed from previous commitments, notably a delegation in 2000 by the ACP-EU Joint Parliamentary Assembly (report by Mr. Corrie, Mrs. Kinnock and Mr. Bawa Bwari). That mission, it should be recalled, was cut short by the coup in June 2000 by the Malaita Eagle Force which led to the forced resignation of Prime Minister Bartholomew Ulufa'alu. At that point a caretaker government led by Prime Minister Manasseh Sgavare took over.

The 5 December Parliamentary Elections thus constituted a crucial opportunity to put some kind of normality back to the Solomon Islands and, indeed, the potential arrest of a situation which could otherwise lead to a total collapse of that society. For two years citizens had been living in fear of further escalation of tensions and violence. It was always clear that the ability of candidates to convince the electorate that they could contribute to restoring peace and a less violent order would be the first and foremost criteria for voters. Even with a successful outcome the long-term future for the country is not assured by elections alone. Deep seated feelings of suspicion and mistrust must be overcome between the islands of Guadalcanal and Malaita but everyone agreed that fair and transparent elections would be a necessary first step on the long road to reconciliation. In breaking the cycle of mistrust, many issues need to be addressed. Some of the key elements are:

- Policies of reconciliation must continue. These must include the difficult issues of internal migration, land ownership and the distribution of jobs.
- The handing in of arms and stolen property. The disbanding of small warlords still operating around the capital.
- return of credibility and authority to the Solomon Islands police force and an end to the system of semi-official "special constables" which have operated under dubious provisions.
- progress must be made on the question of the, seemingly, self-perpetuating and arbitrary system of compensation (claims) for injuries suffered and property lost.

- The economy must be given the highest priority and EU assistance can play a role in this respect. A responsible policy on the islands' natural resources (especially fish stocks and timber) are vitally important.

## **II. The international Observation Mission**

The international Election Observation Mission comprised 72 observers and was officially established on 13 November 2001 on the request of the Solomon Islands Electoral Commission.

Its purpose was to assess compliance with the electoral framework and implementation of the legal provisions specified in the Solomon Islands laws and the guidelines and decisions of the Electoral Commission.

The EP delegation took the decision to form part of the international team (rather than operating on its own) as it was felt that a mix of nationalities at each of the polling stations was important. It was well known that Australia and New Zealand would supply the highest number of observers, for obvious geopolitical reasons, and a European presence was therefore all the more important. This approach was not without drawbacks, however, since observers were sometimes separated from their officials and had to work with very little, if any, logistical support.

## **III. Deployment**

The EP delegation arrived on the morning of Sunday 2 December and participated in the general briefing of the observation team that day. Mr. Graham Elson (UK) had been appointed coordinator of the international observers and led the preparations. Instructions were given to be ready for deployment at 7 am the following morning when helicopters and planes, provided by the Australian and New Zealand Governments would pick up observers and take them out to all provinces of the islands. The EP delegation was assigned to provinces as follows:

Mr. John Corrie: Guadalcanal Island, southeast corner (East Central Constituency)  
Mr. Gerard Collins: Guadalcanal Island, Honiara (Honiara Capital Constituency)  
Mr. Richard Wester: Isabel Island (Maringe/Kokota Constituency)

## **IV. Voting System**

Solomon Islands' unicameral parliament has 50 seats and the members are elected in a first past the post system along the lines of UK election law. Each candidate is allowed to send two polling agents to observe the casting of ballots. Similarly, for the counting process, one counting agent is allowed. Polling is quite unique in the sense that voters cast a numbered ballot (identical for all candidates but for the serial number printed) in the ballot box of their preferred candidate. This system, *a priori*, could lend itself to abuse as it affords the opportunity to take ballots out of the polling station and, potentially, to sell it on to any of the candidates to be put by another voter in their box at a later time during the day. However, as polling unfolded, nothing was observed to suggest that this had been the case. The correct handling and sealing of boxes is crucial in this system. It was interesting to note that each candidate in a constituency had been assigned a symbol of his/her choice. The symbols were used by candidates during their

campaigns but, also, were meant to help electors identify the ballot box of their candidate at polling stations (the symbols were affixed to the ballot box for each candidate). A system of marking the nail cuticle of the left hand little finger, prior to the ballot paper being issued, was in place.

## **V. Observations on Polling Day, 5 December**

As the EP delegation was split into the various international teams a brief summary from the three constituencies we covered follows:

### *Guadalcanal Island (East Central Constituency)*

Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> and Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> were spent going round the six polling stations, ensuring that they were ready. In one instance the polling station was built on the Tuesday afternoon. Everyone was extremely friendly and cooperative, but there was some confusion about who was or who was not on the voting roll.

A “special constable”, previously a senior militant, produced a list of people to the regions electoral officer and argued that these names were not on the roll although they should have been. In fact, he demanded that the issue be examined and even threatened to confiscate ballot boxes from the constituency. This was a case of clear intimidation. However, after numerous phone calls to the Electoral Commission in Honiara, it was established that these electors were on a list, but in the wrong areas. A compromise was reached on how they could be allowed to vote whereafter the ballot boxes could go out to the polling stations.

On visiting one of the polling stations for the opening it was disappointing to note that the ballot boxes were not properly sealed.

There was a steady stream of voters at all polling stations in the constituency with about 1% not being on the Register.

There was no intimidation whatsoever at any of the polling stations visited, but there was a lack of understanding of the proper way to run a polling station in certain respects. This was particularly evident on closing where the final sealing of boxes did not work smoothly at all. Overall, though, polling officers were dedicated to their task and there were no obvious signs of other major problems.

There was a major logistical problem in connection with the return trip to Honiara. Mr. Corrie and the other observers were simply told that no transport had been foreseen and that the helicopter was nowhere near. This was totally unacceptable as the team now had to make their way back in an open speedboat (a five hour journey in +36 C and in heavy seas) which could easily have ended in disaster. Additionally, by the time the team returned to Honiara it was too late to see the votes being counted.

### *Guadalcanal Island (Honiara Capital Constituency)*

Mr. Collins and Mr. Anthony Crasner (Commission Head of Delegation in Port Morsby, Papua New Guinea) covered 13 polling stations. Proceedings went smoother than in East Central and the many worries that existed beforehand (four polling stations were in previously militant areas) did not, in the main, materialise.

As provided for in the election provisions, police officers were present outside the polling stations. With one exception, no unduly influence was observed.

The sealing of ballot boxes was one aspect that worked much better than in the constituency visited by Mr. Corrie. Only on two occasions was the procedure not entirely understood. There was in some instances a shortage of sealing wax, but tape was used instead.

On a few occasions, voters were turned back as they were not on the electoral roll for the constituency where they presented themselves to vote. This demonstrated that, despite all efforts by the Electoral Commission, some problems do occur due to the influx of people to Honiara from the provinces. It can be assumed that these voters were still on list in their old constituencies although they had either moved to or were residing in Honiara.

The checking for invisible ink on each voter's little finger nail cuticle proceeded satisfactorily. The polling officer turned two people back on account of ink being present.

The transportation of the sealed ballot boxes to the counting centre was observed for five polling stations. No problems were observed in this respect. Counting started on time but was slower than expected.

Overall, no problems which would have led to a questioning of the fairness of the proceedings were observed.

#### *Isabel Island (Maringe / Kokota Constituency)*

A total of eight polling stations were covered. As Isabel Island is an area which has remained unaffected by recent violence a smooth functioning of the election was more or less expected. Indeed, this turned out to be the case.

On two occasions some problems with the sealing of boxes were observed. It appeared clear that this had more to do with slight misunderstandings of procedure than anything else.

Police officers were present at most of the polling stations covered but, at two of them, they were inside the station rather than outside. No intimidation was observed.

Inking procedures and the checking of voters against the electoral lists were done with great care.

On a few occasions, reported to Mr. Wester but not directly observed, voters were turned back since they were not on the list.

The transportation of the ballot boxes to the counting centre was observed for one of the polling stations and proceeded without any problems.

The counting procedure was monitored from start to finish (10 hours). It was carried out meticulously.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Although the three Constituencies covered by the EP delegation presented some differences between them, as could have been expected, the shortcomings observed were not of a nature which would have led the members of the delegation to question the fairness of the election. Potentially, the incident at East Central Constituency over the electoral lists could have jeopardised this conclusion, as, to begin with, threats were made to interfere with the voting if a solution were not found. In the end, the compromise reached, after clarifying matters with the Electoral Commission in Honiara, can be deemed satisfactory. Thus, the members of the EP delegation could endorse the Press Release issued by the coordinators of the International Election Observers Mission on Monday 10 December (annexed to this report).

# INTERNATIONAL ELECTION OBSERVERS MISSION

## *Solomon Islands General Election 2001*

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## **PRESS RELEASE**

Date : Monday 10th December 2001

### **Solomon Islands December 5<sup>th</sup> Election Peaceful, Fair and Transparent**

The International Election Observation Mission, comprising 72 observers, was established in Honiara on 13<sup>th</sup> November 2001 for the purpose of observing the December 5<sup>th</sup>-Solomon Islands Parliamentary Elections. The Mission was co-ordinated by Mr. Graham Elson from the United Kingdom and deployed teams of observers to every province of the Solomon Islands.

During the pre-polling day period the Mission was able to observe the administrative preparations for the election and to consult with election officials, some of the political parties and some civil society groups.

The Mission commends the Electoral Commission for conducting its constitutional responsibilities in an organised, professional and transparent manner. We were particularly impressed by the commitment and determination demonstrated by the Electoral Commission staff and its technical advisers in meeting the challenges of the task before them. Despite the many infrastructure and transport difficulties facing them, their hard work ensured that the election took pace smoothly, on time and substantially in compliance with the legal requirements.

The extensive voter education and awareness programme undertaken by the Election Commission impressed us. The Mission notes with particular interest the emphasis placed on the issue of voters not selling their votes.

However, the Mission has concerns about the registration process and subsequent compilation of the register of electors carried out by the Election Commission.

Whilst recognising the vast improvements made in the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the register of electors, there were numerous instances of voters or whole families of voters being unable to vote due to their names being omitted from the final register of electors. The Mission recommends that for future elections improving the training, management and control of registration officers in particular, and the registration process generally remains a key task facing the Election Commission.

All of the Mission's observers were impressed by the dedication and diligence demonstrated by the overwhelming majority of polling station staff in the conduct of their duties on polling day.

With one or two exceptions, the polling stations opened and closed at the appointed times. Our observers noted the orderly, calm and patient way in which the electors conducted themselves and the role of the police in assisting the smooth conduct of the polling.

The majority of our observer teams witnessed one or more polling station in the areas they were covering where the ballot boxes were not sealed in the prescribed manner. In most of these instances the paper seals had not been placed over the ballot box locks.

There were a handful of polling stations where observers were concerned that voters could not cast their vote in complete secrecy. They also observed a number of instances where illiterate or disabled voters were being assisted to vote by persons other than the Presiding Officer.

A number of other minor technical irregularities were observed in some polling stations. The Mission believes that many of these could be overcome with additional training of Returning Officers and polling station staff.

All observers reported that the polling stations they observed at the close of polling were closed in the prescribed manner. There were no reported instances of votes being cast after 5pm.

However, there were a number of reports of unauthorised persons being present inside the polling station after it closed. The Election Commission should ensure that unauthorised persons are not present in polling stations or during the transportation of the ballot boxes and election materials from the polling stations to the counting centres.

Most of the Mission's observer teams followed the ballot boxes and election materials during their transportation from the polling station to the counting centre. None of the Mission's observer teams reported any interference with the ballot boxes or election materials during their transportation.

At the counting centres the Returning Officers and their staff conducted the counting in a very meticulous and transparent manner,

However, it is the view of the Mission that the counting could have been conducted in a more expeditious manner without compromising the transparency of the process.

Of more concern to the Mission however is the long delay, in many instances, between the completion of the count and the receipt of the official notice of the result by the Election Commission from the Returning Officer. This in turn lead to lengthy delays in the official announcement of the result to the nation by the Chairman of the Election Commission.

Whilst recognising the communication difficulties here in the Solomon Islands, delays of almost 48 hours between completion of the count and official announcement of the result by the Election Commission are unacceptable.

Such delays can raise understandable suspicion and speculation amongst the wider electorate that results are being changed or manipulated.



The Mission believes that the Election Commission should ensure that in future elections the necessary equipment and procedures are in place to avoid such communication delays.

The Mission suggests the Election Commission should include all the foregoing recommendations in its ongoing review of the election laws.

**However, notwithstanding the problems and shortcomings highlighted in this statement, it is the view of the Mission that overall the outcome of these elections successfully represents the will of the people and that they were peaceful, fair and transparent.**

These elections mark an important stage in the democratic development of the Solomon Islands. We wish the newly elected members of parliament and the people of the Solomon Islands every success in meeting the challenges ahead of them in the future political and economic development of their nation.

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### **Additional Notes for Editors and Journalists**

The International Election Observation Mission was formed at the request of the Solomon Islands Election Commission and at the invitation of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Mission was co-ordinated by Mr. Graham Elson, from the United Kingdom, with the assistance of Mrs. Stephanie Chetwynd and its office was based at the British High Commission,

The Mission comprised observers from 13 countries/organisations who supplied the following number of observers-

Australia	20
New Zealand	9
United States of America	9
The United Kingdom	6
European Union	5
Japan	4
Papua New Guinea	3
Vanuatu	3
Kiribati	3
Fiji	3
Samoa	3
Cook Islands	2
Taiwan	2

The Mission is very grateful to the Australian and New Zealand Governments for supplying an aircraft, helicopter, naval vessel and the full resources of the IPMT to assist with the deployment of the Mission's observers to all the provinces of the Solomon islands.

There was three other international observer missions that operated independently of the main International Election Observation Mission. These were the United Nations, the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Pacific Forum.