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## CHAPTER 5

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### **Preparations for Polling**

In preparing for the election, a number of practical steps had to be taken to give effect to the new regulatory and procedural system introduced by the reforms. The election date was set by the President soon after he was advised by the Chairman of the Elections Commission that the final voters' list was ready. With this basic phase of the process having been completed, the Elections Commission turned its attention to the acquisition of election materials and supplies. These included such items as ballot boxes, ballot papers, voting ink, voting screens, tilly lamps, seals, etc. Some of these were supplied by the International Foundation for Electoral Systems (IFES), a US-based organisation, to meet widespread concern about the integrity of the existing stock.

The Elections Commission shared with us some of difficulties they faced in deciding on appropriate supplies and their acquisition. We learnt, for example, that there had been a lively local argument over whether metal ballot boxes should replace wooden boxes which had been used in the past. The argument in favour of metal boxes prevailed. Similarly, local opinion was divided as to whether the ballot papers should be printed locally or abroad. Eventually, it was decided that the ballot papers should be printed in the United States of America, a decision made, it was thought, to enhance the confidence of opposition parties and the general public in the electoral process.

Despite all the precautions over printing the ballot papers abroad, when they were delivered to Georgetown errors were found in the titles of two of the lists of candidates: the title of the PPP/Civic list of candidates was printed only as PPP, and the title of the list of candidates of the UGI was printed as United Guyanese International instead of Union of Guyanese International. As might have been expected, the first error triggered considerable controversy among the opposition political parties, particularly in the PPP/Civic, and at one stage threatened to derail preparations for the elections which were already at an advanced stage. The ruling party, the PNC, also expressed concern, and another opposition party, the WPA, called publicly for the ballot papers to be reprinted. The EAB, a local independent body, also publicly expressed its dismay over the errors and called for a reprinting. It expressed the view that, since the Commission could not give a guarantee that its decision to treat the flawed ballot paper as valid in law could not be challenged subsequently, legal difficulties were very likely to arise after the elections.

In an effort to ascertain the facts that led to the errors in the ballot paper, and to assist the Commission in the search for a solution, we made contact with the Chairman of the Commission as soon as we learnt of the error. The Group, represented by the Acting Chair, Mrs Shirley Miller, and Mr Carl Dundas, leader of the Secretariat's support team, met the Chairman of the Commission twice on 24 September. The following day the Group as a whole met the full Commission to discuss the matter.

The sequence of events, particularly the precise date when the political parties were informed of the errors remained unclear, however. This may have been due to the apparent approach taken by the Commission that by the time the errors were discovered, the question of who was responsible and the relevance of reprinting the ballot papers had become largely academic. Indeed, the Chairman of the Commission stated that the most immediate question was how to deal with the problem.

He informed us that he first became aware of the mistake on the afternoon of Saturday, 19 September, and that he informed two other members of the Commission on Monday, 21 September. He further stated that the three opposition members on the Commission went to see Dr Cheddi Jagan, the leader of the PPP/Civic, to tell him of the error. We were told, at our meeting with the Commission, that they held extensive discussions on the matter on Thursday, 24 September. A range of possibilities had been considered, including reprinting of the ballot papers and postponement of the elections. The Commission informed us that there were several reasons why it decided to proceed with the elections. Among these was the fact that the overseas voting had already started, that a reprinting of the ballot papers would necessitate a postponement of the disciplined forces' vote set for 28 September, and that when the error was first discovered the agency that assisted with funding for the printing of the original ballot papers told the Chairman that the papers could not be reprinted and delivered in time for the 5 October elections.

The Chairman of the Commission explained to us that among the other options examined was a proposal that the British Government might be prepared, if requested, to fund reprinting the ballot papers in the light of assurances given that the firm of Thomas De La Rue could print and deliver the papers by Tuesday, 29 September. Alternative printing opportunities in Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago had also been considered.

We were told that in order to pursue the option with the British Government, a formal request by the Guyana Government was required. However, members of the Commission felt that any option where the Government would be required to initiate a request was not realistic because of the likelihood of delay and uncertainty inherent in the procedure for making such a request. They explained that the Government had not been in favour of having the ballots printed overseas in the first place.

The Commission further explained that Dr Jagan, as the leader of the party most likely to be disadvantaged by the error, had put forward a number of proposals for the Commission to consider. First, he indicated that reprinting the ballot papers was the preferred solution. Second, he proposed that all the political parties should agree that the error would not be an issue regardless

of the outcome of the election. Third, a declaration should be sought from the courts that the error would not invalidate the election. If these last two conditions were met, he would not press for a reprint and the Elections Commission's preparations for the election could continue but should include a vigorous nationwide publicity campaign to let voters know that the PPP and PPP/Civic were one and the same party. The PPP/Civic was not in favour of postponing the elections.

Although the Commission recognised the importance of publicising the position of the PPP/Civic, there seemed to be some reluctance to go as far as Dr Jagan would have liked for fear of being accused of highlighting any one political party. Therefore, in its public statement on the matter, the Elections Commission merely stated that any elector who wished to vote for the PPP/Civic list could do so and that a properly marked vote for the initials 'PPP' would count as a vote for the PPP/Civic list of candidates in both general and regional elections. A sample of the ballot paper with the party symbols is at *Annex VIII*.

In an attempt to address the issue of multiple voting, the Elections Commission purchased new stocks of ink that would be used to mark a person who had voted. This was of a different colour from ink used in the past and had been tested and found not easy to remove. The new ink was acquired because of suspicions that the old stock could be easily removed. The new ink would make it difficult for people to vote more than once.

We placed importance on the transparency of the process under which election officials were selected, screened, appointed and trained. It was the task of the Commission to recruit and train about 4,000 of these officers. Five categories of persons who might contribute to the election process at all levels had been identified, including teachers, divisional registrars and members of non-governmental organisations (NGOs). Considerable difficulties, however, appear to have been encountered in the training of these officers. Part of the problem was the difficulty in informing everyone in good time where training sessions were to be held. The situation was not helped by reliance on volunteers – some of whom could not be contacted at the last moment or declined to take up their posts at short notice.

Judging from our own limited experience gained while travelling around the country, the logistic difficulties for the timely delivery of election materials to every one of the approximately 980 polling places, particularly those in the remote parts of the country, must have been considerable. It would therefore not be out of place to comment favourably on the generally satisfactory level of preparedness of the polling places that we visited during the disciplined forces poll and on polling day itself.