

# Introduction

In October 2001, the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Mr Don McKinnon, received a request from the Chairman of the Electoral Commission of Solomon Islands, Mr Paul Tovua, for the Commonwealth to observe the 2001 National Parliamentary elections. On 6 November, the Commonwealth Secretary-General confirmed that he would constitute such a Group, the first positive response which encouraged Australia, New Zealand, the United Nations, Pacific Forum Secretariat and other similar observer groups.

These were Solomon Islands' sixth National Parliamentary elections since achieving independence in 1978. The 2001 elections were held against a background of more than two years of 'ethnic tension' between militant groups from Guadalcanal and Malaita. The Commonwealth worked to try to bring these ethnic hostilities to an end.

## The Observer Group and its Terms of Reference

The manner and the process to be carried out by Commonwealth Observers were set down and agreed by Commonwealth Heads of Government. The Observer Group of four Observers was chosen from the different regions of the Commonwealth, and supported by three staff members of the Commonwealth Secretariat. The Group was led by Mr Bowen Wells, a former Minister and Chairman of the International Development Select Committee, and Member of Parliament of the United Kingdom. Mr Wells is also the immediate past Treasurer of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. The composition of the Group is set out at Annex I. The Secretary-General gave us the following terms of reference:

*The Group is established by the Commonwealth Secretary-General at the request of the Electoral Commission of the Solomon Islands. It is to observe relevant aspects of the organisation and conduct of the General Election in accordance with the laws of Solomon Islands. It is to consider the various factors impinging on the credibility of the electoral process as a whole and to determine in its own judgement whether the conditions exist for a free expression of will by the electors and if the results of the elections reflect the wishes of the people of Solomon Islands.*

*The Group is to act impartially and independently. It has no executive role; its function is not to supervise but to observe the process as a whole and to form a judgement accordingly. It would also be free to propose to the authorities concerned such action on institutional, procedural and other matters as would assist the holding of such elections.*

*The Group is to submit its report to the Commonwealth Secretary-General, who will forward it to the Government of Solomon Islands, the Electoral Commission of Solomon Islands, the leadership of the political parties taking part in the elections and thereafter to all Commonwealth Governments.*

The establishment of the Group was announced in a press release issued in London on 23 November 2001. This was the 36th Commonwealth Observer Group since October 1990, and the first in Solomon Islands.

## Method of Work

The Chairperson of our Group was briefed in London by the Commonwealth Secretary-General on 15 November 2001.

One member of the Group, Ambassador Lucy Bogari, accompanied by a member of the Commonwealth Secretariat staff support team, formed an 'Advance Group' which began its work in Solomon Islands nine days before the arrival of the Main Group. The rest of the Group assembled in Honiara on the afternoon of 27 November 2001. The following morning, the Group was briefed by the Chairman of the Electoral Commission and immediately after the meeting, the Chairperson of the Group issued an Arrival Statement (see *Annex II*) at a press conference.

Over the next three days, the Group was briefed by representatives of the main political parties contesting the elections, Commonwealth Heads of Missions, religious groups, women's organisations, media representatives, the police, and members of the International Peace Monitoring Team (IPMT). The Group also undertook a courtesy visit to the Governor-General. The final briefing was organised by the co-ordinator of logistics for all international observers. A schedule of engagements is at *Annex III*.

On Sunday, 2 December 2001, the Group visited Auki and met with Malaitan Premier David Oeta, the police and members of the IPMT based in Malaita. It also visited Tulagi where it had consultations with members of the police as well as visiting one of the designated polling stations. The final member of our Group, Mr Peter Fonso, arrived on the same day.

On polling day, one member of the Group was deployed to Shortlands in the Western Province where all the polling stations were visited, one to Malu'u in North Malaita where 15 out of 18 polling stations were visited, one in the East and East Central constituencies of Guadalcanal where all polling stations in the conflict area of Marau were visited, and the remaining members covered North-West Guadalcanal and all the constituencies and polling stations in Honiara City. (See *Annex IV* for details of deployment.) The Australian High Commissioner facilitated visits by the Chairperson to polling and counting centres in Western Province on the day after polling.

Observers' ability to reconnoitre the Solomon Islands was severely limited by the absence of planes, boats, motor vehicles and the prevalent security concerns in some parts of Guadalcanal and Malaita. The roads were in such poor condition that it made it very difficult to visit many polling stations and impossible to visit some of them. The Australian and New Zealand Governments (and the European Union) were principally responsible for bringing boats, an airplane and a helicopter making it possible for observers to witness the elections throughout Solomon Islands. Without this provision, an effective observer mission would have been impossible. We are deeply in their debt.

The Group reassembled in Honiara on Friday, 7 December, the day after the count, for a post-deployment discussion and to prepare its Report.

(The Interim Statement issued on 5 December 2001 is shown at *Annex V*, while the Departure Statement of 9 December 2001 is at *Annex VI*.)