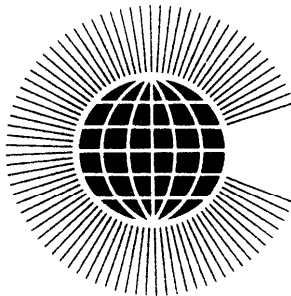


Voting for Democracy

Conference of Commonwealth Chief Election Officers*
Queens' College Cambridge - 23-26 March 1998

RE-REGISTRATION IN BELIZE

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Getting the Register Right

BACKGROUND

In 1995 the Elections and Boundaries Commission approached the Government of Belize for resources to conduct a re-registration of electors, however, due to a lack of funds this did not materialize. In 1996, the Commission again approached Government for the necessary funds to conduct the re-registration of electors exercise. This time the administration made a decision to conduct a national enumeration exercise. Although such decision was made only limited funds were provided for the activity. Thus, the Commission, realizing that municipal elections were due within ten months, decided to conduct the exercise in phases. They began with the seven towns where elections were schedule to be held. In March of 1997, the ruling party lost in all seven municipalities.

Immediately following this lost a Cabinet decision was made to implement the Commission's earlier request for re-registration. The necessary legislation was put in place along with the associated funds. Although the decision was sudden, approximately twelve months before general elections, the majority of the Commission welcome it. This was largely due to the fact that the Commission had embarked on a project to automate the electoral register. By the end of November 1997 the new register was approximately 48% of what it was before re-registration and that equated to approximately 66% of voting age population. To date, 10th March 1998, the figure is approximately 69% of the voting age population.

One of the major difficulty experienced during the re-registration exercise was that some applicants were unable to

provide satisfactory proof of their citizenship and age, as required by the Constitution.

Section 92 (a) of Belize Constitution states:

At any general election -

(a) every citizen of Belize or citizen of any Commonwealth Country who has attained the age of eighteen years and satisfies the Representation of the People Act shall have the right to vote.

THE CIVIL REGISTRY

In November of 1997, at the Conference for Strengthening the Civil Registries of Central America sponsored by Panama Electoral Tribunal, Organization of American States and Inter-American Development Bank, member States of Central America, Belize and Panama concluded that, “the Civil Registry is the foundation of citizen identification as well as of the electoral registries”. It is also an interdisciplinary institution with functions of a legal, statistical and social nature. It is likewise a permanent institution requiring administrative, economic and juridical autonomy which may ensure independence and efficiency in the provision of its services.

The re-registration exercise brought out the fact that the civil registry has not kept up with the times. The registrar of births and deaths has the most unenviable job, that of managing two employee to do manual searches in huge voluminous handwritten books. This, along with the fact that there were

many instances where the Deputy Registrar in the rural areas for one reason or another did not forward vital information to the central Registry in Belize city. This became a bottleneck for electors who tried to provide proof of their age and citizenship. For those whose births were not registered, late registration of birth became a tedious process.

The inadequate operation of the civil registry affects the applicability of human rights and restricts the right to a name and nationality as provided for in the Convention of the Rights of the Child (1990). Likewise, it negatively affects the quality, timeliness, security and reliability of the vital statistics that are essential for the carrying out of social programs in the areas of education, health, housing and migration, among others. Finally, it contributes to the entrenchment of poverty particularly in the rural parts of the country as these persons are unable to conduct matters pertaining to the registration of land as a result they lose the opportunity to access financing for entrepreneurial projects.

In an effort to facilitate the registration process, the Election Management Body revived an old policy of allowing electors to register, who could provide a baptismal record along with primary school record or three affidavits of their birth, where *at least* one is given by a person older than the applicant. In addition to that the Management Body paid for additional staff to assist with the searches at the civil registry. The election management body also approached the Organization of American States, Unit for the Promotion of Democracy, to assist with computerization for recording births deaths and -marriages. This program is well under way, however, new difficulties have now arisen. These are of a legal nature since only documents with the country's embossed coat of arms that are personally signed by the Registrar are legally acceptable, also the laws were not written with the existing level of technology in mind. Thus,

it is often difficult to convince the legal mind that a copy is a copy, even though it was not produced by using carbon paper.

AUTOMATING THE VOTER'S REGISTER

Earlier it was mentioned that the Elections and Boundaries Commission welcome the re-registration exercise especially since we were in the process of automating the voter's register. In July of 1996 the Commission embarked on the computerization of the registers of electors, but that the enumeration exercise as defined under the law was inadequate in providing the necessary mechanisms for updating the registers. However, with the advent of the re-registration exercise we were able to sanitize the data and provide the Election Management Body with a fully automated register. Care must be taken when automating not to allow the system designers to dictate what the computer can do. One must always have the computer do what it is you want done. That is what computers are for!
