



CPA UK ELECTION ASSESSMENT MISSION

3-8 MAY 2015

FINAL REPORT



The UK General Election

Thursday 7 May 2015





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**CPA UK ELECTION ASSESSMENT MISSION
FINAL REPORT OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
UK GENERAL ELECTION 7 MAY 2015**

BACKGROUND

1.01. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK Branch (CPA UK) conducted an Election Assessment Mission (EAM) to the UK General Election on 7 May 2015. The multilateral delegation comprised 22 parliamentarians and election officials from Canada, the Cook Islands, Ghana, India, Jamaica, Malta, Namibia, New Zealand, Pakistan, Rwanda, Seychelles and Uzbekistan. This election was the second time International Observers were able to apply for accreditation and observe the UK electoral process.

1.02. In 2010, CPA UK, in conjunction with the Royal Commonwealth Society, conducted a small-scale observation of the General Election with seven parliamentarians and four civil society officials from across the Commonwealth. The 2015 assessment mission was intended to build on the outcomes and learning achieved in 2010. **The aim of the project was to provide an opportunity for parliamentarians and election officials from Commonwealth countries to develop an understanding of the UK electoral process, to undertake an assessment of the process, and to observe the conduct of Election Day.**

1.03. The objectives of the 2015 EAM were to:

- Provide an opportunity for parliamentarians and election officials from Commonwealth countries to develop an understanding of the electoral process of the UK
- Provide training to allow participants with no previous experience to undertake short-term election monitoring
- Use the experience of parliamentarians and officials from Commonwealth countries in observing other international elections to develop those with less experience
- Highlight the work of the Commonwealth and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association as international bodies with support for democracy and democratic processes as core values
- Release a report on the assessment mission's findings and recommendations for further improvement and safeguarding of the electoral process

1.04. By bringing together Observers from across the Commonwealth to undertake a larger-scale and objective observation and assessment of a UK General Election, CPA UK's intention was to encourage the sharing of best practices and promote greater dialogue between member nations.





Such exchanges serve to improve electoral processes and benefit the progress and protection of modern democracy throughout the Commonwealth.

1.05. In any election process, the basic elements are the right to vote; universal and equal suffrage; and to ensure that eligible individuals are able to cast their vote in a secret ballot in a free and fair process. The EAM participants were generally impressed by the conduct of the election and noted that it was undertaken in a fair and free manner. In particular, the Observers were impressed by the culture of trust, honesty and enthusiasm that was present throughout the entire process, as well as the calm and orderly manner in which campaigning, voting and the counting of ballots was undertaken.

1.06. Whilst the EAM came away with an overall positive view that the UK election process produces results which accurately reflect the will of the people, the Observers also noted systemic vulnerabilities that could make the process corruptible or open to fraud. The UK electoral system operates under and relies upon a high degree of assumed trust. It is assumed and understood that both election officials and voters are honest and do not intend to defraud the electorate. However, vulnerabilities do exist and should be addressed to further safeguard the election process. As such, the EAM offers key recommendations for improvement, which are outlined throughout this report under the relevant section and listed in full at the end.

PRE-ELECTION DAY PROGRAMME

2.01. As a short-term mission, the focus of the Observers was primarily on Election Day procedures rather than the broader and all-inclusive aspects of an election process, such as the legal framework, the full campaign, candidates' financial reporting or the media coverage.

2.02. Following a comprehensive briefing programme by CPA UK on 3 and 4 May, the Observers deployed to 6 constituencies throughout the UK to conduct their election assessment. The sample constituencies were Birmingham Ladywood, Brighton Pavilion, Exeter, Glasgow East, Watford and Wirral West.

2.03. During the two days prior to Election Day, the Observers met with relevant election stakeholders, including parliamentary candidates from all of the major parties, election officials, local officials, civil society organisations, union representatives and student groups, among others. These meetings provided an overall picture of the election campaign, process and specific issues in the diverse constituencies. The Observers noted an active and lively election campaign with enthusiastic and motivated canvassing by party candidates. They also commented on the active social media campaigns and discussion around the TV debates, noting a significant amount of engaged young voters.





2.04. There was a general concern noted by candidates across the country about the change in the voter registration process - from 'head of household' to individual - since June 2014, and the negative effect this could have on the number of eligible voters¹. Although the Observers did not observe the process of registration first-hand, based on their conversations with election stakeholders they were of the view that registration could be improved through centralisation of the electoral roll, as those who move house are often at a disadvantage, and the lack of centralisation could result in voters being registered simultaneously on two different electoral rolls.

2.05. **Postal Vote Opening.** The Observers attended sessions of postal vote opening in five constituencies. In all cases, (Acting) Returning Officers ensured that only those postal votes with signatures and dates on the statements matching those on the original applications were deemed valid. Once removed from their envelopes and counted, the ballots were placed in ballot boxes and securely put aside until the counting process on Election Day. Following issues of concern with postal voting in the 2005 and 2010 General Elections, the Observers noted that the tightening of guidelines further safeguarded the process and reduced any vulnerabilities to fraud of a system that has clearly become an entrenched part of the UK electoral process.

ELECTION DAY - POLLING STATIONS

3.01. CPA UK Observers spent Election Day visiting 176 polling stations to observe the opening, voting and closing procedures, as well as 6 count centres. They reported that the atmosphere was mostly orderly and calm. Voters, party agents and polling station staff approached the process with confidence and trust in a general environment of transparency and accountability. Overall, Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks ensured that procedures were well-administered and followed properly throughout the opening of polling stations, the voting process, and the closing of polling stations. With some notable exceptions, Electoral Commission procedural guidance was properly followed.

3.02. The Observers also commended the commitment, integrity and collective pride of the polling station staff and their open and welcoming approach to observation. They noted the professionalism of these officials, who were generally felt to be experienced and knowledgeable. Issues were dealt with effectively, and the friendly and hardworking staff were credited with running a smooth and calm process.

¹ Since the time of writing the Electoral Commission have published new figures. The Parliamentary registers in May 2015 contained 45,336,013 entries, an increase of 1% since February/March 2014. However, approximately 1.9 million register entries on the local government register are for electors who did not register individually and so are being retained under the IER transitional arrangements. For further information see:

http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/190464/IER-June-report.pdf





3.03. **Standardisation of Procedures.** However, one overarching concern of the Observers was the lack of national standardisation for Election Day procedures, regulations and instructions, as the conduct of elections is the responsibility of local authorities rather than a centralised body such as the Electoral Commission, whose main function is to provide guidance. Across all six constituencies, the Observers remarked on inconsistencies in the information provided to voters and signage about voting procedures and regulations. Addressing this widespread issue could lighten the administrative and logistical burden on Presiding Officers and reduce the number of invalid votes.

RECOMMENDATION

To ensure greater consistency in the application of Election Day procedures and regulations across the UK, the Electoral Commission should issue standardised national templates and instructions to all local authorities and Election Day officials. These instructions should include the size and placement of signage around the polling station and in the polling booths, including those illustrating to voters how to mark their ballot, explaining that only one voter is allowed in a polling booth at one time, and clearly identifying which ballot box to use if more than one election is being held simultaneously.

3.04. **Opening.** The Observers were present for the opening of 11 polling stations and noted that opening procedures were followed properly in the majority of instances. With the exception of one polling station, all assigned polling station staff arrived at 0630 to set up the polling stations. In almost all cases, the ballot papers and their numbers were checked, and the empty ballot boxes were shown to all present before being sealed. Observers in Birmingham Ladywood and Glasgow East raised concerns over two polling stations observed for opening procedures whereby the ballot boxes were sealed without being shown to those in the room beforehand. This is a direct violation of the regulation that requires ballot boxes to be confirmed as being empty by all present before being sealed. All 11 polling stations observed by the EAM for the opening procedures opened on time at 0700. The overall performance of the polling station staff and the conduct of operations were assessed positively in 10 of the 11 cases, and all polling stations observed for the opening were assessed positively with respect to the transparency of the opening process.

RECOMMENDATION

To safeguard the ballot boxes from opening until the count process, numbered seals should be used across the country, to be recorded at opening and reconciled at the count centre as a means of ensuring the ballot boxes have not been tampered with.

3.05. **Voting Process.** The EAM observed the voting process at 154 polling stations and assessed the procedures positively in an overwhelming majority of cases, with respect to the overall performance of polling station staff and conduct of operations, voters' understanding of voting





procedures, the level of confidence that voters cast their ballots freely, and the transparency of the voting process. In all cases, the following voting regulations were fully respected: all assigned polling station staff members were present; all essential polling materials were present; voters' elector numbers were marked against the 'Register of Electors' and written in the 'Corresponding Number List'; all ballot papers contained an official mark; all eligible voters were allowed to vote; all ineligible voters were refused the possibility to vote²; and all voters who required assistance received it. Moreover, and of particular relevance to the EAM, all Observers were able to follow the proceedings unhindered.

3.06. Postal Votes. Across all 6 constituencies observed, 38 polling stations accepted postal votes delivered in person. Despite confusion by some voters having registered for a postal vote wishing to vote in person, Presiding Officers understood the procedures which ensured no duplication of voting. In 10 polling stations, proxy voting was observed. In one polling station, a request for a tendered ballot was observed. Correct procedures for these aspects of voting were consistently followed.

3.07. Procedures. The EAM also reported that there were procedures followed less closely. For example, while in almost 90% of polling stations observed, voters were asked to confirm their name and address, as the regulations require, in the remaining cases polling station staff would simply review the voter's polling card to check them against the electoral roll.³

3.08. Accessibility. In 11 cases across 3 of the 6 constituencies, polling stations were inaccessible or had very limited accessibility for voters with restricted mobility and were not wheelchair accessible. In some cases where polling stations had access for disabled voters, the signage displayed to that effect was unclear.

RECOMMENDATION

All polling stations should have clearly marked access for people with limited mobility, and wherever possible, a dedicated member of staff should be on hand to support those with special physical or educational needs.

3.09. Campaigning Presence. One major cause of concern in a number of polling stations was the absence of regulation on campaigning on Election Day, and the presence of party supporters in and around the polling stations. While the vicinity around polling stations in most cases was free from undue influence, intimidation or campaign activities, this was not the situation in 31 instances

² Voters were refused to vote if they were not registered or were at the wrong polling station. The Observers noted that polling station staff were always helpful in directing voters to the correct polling station or providing the phone number to call if the voter wanted to find out more about their registration.

³ In a few polling stations observed in the Glasgow East constituency, voters were turned away and asked to return if they were unable to provide either their polling card or identification, contrary to the regulations not requiring either to be shown.





reported from areas of Birmingham Ladywood, Glasgow East and Wirral West. The Observers noted with apprehension the clear campaigning by party agents/tellers instructing people how to vote as they entered the polling station, handing out campaign leaflets⁴, or party vehicles with loudspeakers driving in front of polling stations and announcing who to vote for⁵. The presence of these active and particularly vocal party agents/tellers was directly outside the entrance of the polling station or just inside, with the concept of ‘the vicinity’ of the polling station not clearly defined.

RECOMMENDATION

An ‘electoral silence’ period from midnight of Election Day to the close of polls should be imposed and enforced nationwide, with no campaigning allowed in the vicinity of the polling station; the vicinity should be defined as a minimum of 20 metres from the entrance to the polling station building.

3.10. **Layout.** While in the majority of polling stations observed, the layout provided for a calm and orderly flow to the voting process, there were many polling stations that did not have the adequate size or space to accommodate long queues while simultaneously ensuring the secrecy of the vote. A number of polling stations in both Birmingham Ladywood and Glasgow East were particularly over-crowded and unable to cope with the numbers arriving. In 25 instances reported, the secrecy of the vote was not sufficiently protected, due to poorly positioned or shaped polling booths that were too close to the queues or backed against windows.

RECOMMENDATION

To encourage order in the voting process and to guarantee that the secrecy of the vote is not compromised, polling stations should provide the adequate size and space to accommodate large numbers of voters, while ensuring the positioning and format of the polling booths maximise privacy.

3.11. **Staffing Matters.** A final issue identified by the Observers was adequate levels of staffing and the clear identification of those involved in the polling process. Several polling stations observed, again particularly in Birmingham Ladywood and Glasgow East, did not have sufficient staff for queue control, to explain the voting process to those for whom English is not their first language, to notice or prevent more than one voter entering a polling booth at one time⁶, or to occasionally check polling booths or outside activity for any prohibited campaigning⁷. Furthermore,

⁴ In the Glasgow East constituency, where leafleting by party agents/tellers outside polling stations was particularly noted, some party leaflets were also noticed in polling booths.

⁵ This was observed in certain areas of the Birmingham Ladywood constituency.

⁶ Most notably in certain areas of Birmingham Ladywood, there were incidents of ‘group voting’ and the Observers reporting that polling station staff were often unable or sometimes unwilling to enforce the rules over privacy for casting votes.

⁷ For the purposes of this report, Prohibited Campaigning is the current agreement between Political Parties not to actively campaign on Election Day. This is not written out in law.





there appeared to be some confusion among voters on the various roles and responsibilities of those playing a part in the polling process, with voters asking the Observers or party agents/tellers questions that should have been addressed directly to Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks. Clear and visible identification badges, like those worn by the various stakeholders at the count centres, could decrease this confusion and make the voting process even smoother.

RECOMMENDATION

Polling stations should allocate an adequate number of staff to address all issues that might arise during polling, such as long queues, voters requiring more time to explain the voting procedures, ensuring only one voter is present in the polling booth at one time, or occasionally checking the vicinity of the polling station for any prohibited campaigning. All Presiding Officers, Poll Clerks and party agents/tellers should wear clear and visible identification badges with their names and titles to clarify their roles in the polling process.

3.12. **Closing.** The Observers attended the closing of 11 polling stations and reported that all closed on time at 2200 with no queues. Presiding Officers were prepared to administer procedures mandated in the 2013 law that allows any elector in the queue at 2200 to cast a ballot. Clear procedures were in place at all 11 polling stations to manage a queue at closing time. At the only polling station where voters tried to join the queue after 2200⁸, polling station staff followed the correct procedure of turning them away.

3.13. **Sealing of Ballot Boxes.** In 100% of polling stations observed, the slots at the top of ballot boxes were sealed properly once the polling station closed. In all 11 polling stations, all official forms were filled in and all materials were packed into their respective official envelopes and transferred to their respective count centre directly and without delay. Across all 11 polling stations observed at closing, procedures were followed in a calm, orderly and efficient manner.

ELECTION DAY - THE COUNT

4.01. The EAM observed the counting process at six count centres and in 100% of cases, positively assessed the overall conduct of operations and the performance of the counting staff, as well as the transparency of the counting process. In all observed cases, the staff verified that the number of ballots matched the number of papers issued. In all counts observed, the ballot papers were separated by candidate before being counted. The Observers did not report on any signs of ballot-stuffing, bias among staff, or manipulation with the ballots or official forms. The Observers also commented on the thorough process of adjudication of invalid ballots, and the consistency of allowing ballots with one mark other than an “X” to be counted as valid. The EAM reported a high level of confidence that the election results accurately reflected the will of the voters.

⁸ This polling station was in the Glasgow East constituency.





4.02. Counting proceeded without interruption, and all Observers, candidates and party agents were able to follow the proceedings unhindered and at extremely close range, in an atmosphere of excitement and tension as results were announced and the winners declared. The Observers reported that one recount⁹ was requested during their observation. Overall, the EAM expressed how impressed the counting process was in terms of its transparency, accessibility and efficiency. The Observers also noted that the clear identification of every person involved in the counting process improved proceedings and provided clarity with respect to each stakeholder's role at the count centre.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.01. Within the framework of these findings, the EAM concluded that the UK General Election remains remarkable for its efficiency, transparency and integrity. The Observers were particularly impressed with the experienced and approachable (Acting) Returning Officers, Presiding Officers, polling station staff and count centre staff, and their largely professional and appropriate response to any issues arising.

5.02. The CPA UK EAM has made the following six recommendations to the Electoral Commission in a spirit of goodwill and mutual respect for democracy in which they are intended:

- a. **Recommendation 1.** To ensure greater consistency in the application of Election Day procedures and regulations across the UK, the Electoral Commission should issue standardised national templates and instructions to all local authorities and Election Day officials. These instructions should include the size and placement of signage around the polling station and in the polling booths, including those illustrating to voters how to mark their ballot, explaining that only one voter is allowed in a polling booth at one time, and clearly identifying which ballot box to use if more than one election is being held simultaneously.
- b. **Recommendation 2.** To safeguard the ballot boxes from opening until the count process, numbered seals should be used across the country, to be reconciled at the count centre as a means to ensure there has been no tampering with ballot boxes.
- c. **Recommendation 3.** All polling stations should have clearly marked access for people with limited mobility, and wherever possible, a dedicated member of staff should be on hand to support those with special physical or educational needs.

⁹ The recount was requested in the Wirral West constituency.





- d. **Recommendation 4.** An ‘electoral silence’ period from midnight of Election Day to the close of polls should be imposed nationwide, with no campaigning allowed in the vicinity of the polling station; the vicinity should be defined as a minimum of 20 metres from the entrance to the polling station building.
- e. **Recommendation 5.** To encourage order in the voting process and to guarantee that the secrecy of the vote is not compromised, polling stations should provide the adequate size and space to accommodate large numbers of voters, while ensuring the positioning and format of the polling booths maximise privacy.
- f. **Recommendation 6.** Polling stations should allocate an adequate number of staff to address all issues that might arise during polling, such as long queues, voters requiring more time to explain the voting procedures, ensuring only one voter is present in the polling booth at one time, or occasionally checking the vicinity of the polling station for any prohibited campaigning. All Presiding Officers, Poll Clerks and party agents/tellers should wear clear and visible identification badges with their names and titles to clarify their roles in the polling process.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

6.01. CPA UK and the participating observers wish to express their thanks to the Electoral Commission for providing accreditation to the Observers and to the electoral officials and local staff who were very welcoming and accommodating of the observation mission in all six constituencies and throughout Election Day.





CPA UK ELECTION ASSESSMENT MISSION

AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

AIM For Members from Commonwealth Parliaments and election officials to undertake an assessment of the process and conduct of the UK general election in a UK parliamentary constituency.

- OBJECTIVES**
1. To provide an opportunity for parliamentarians and election officials from Commonwealth countries to develop an understanding of the electoral process of the UK.
 2. To provide training to allow participants with no previous experience to undertake short term election monitoring.
 3. To use the experience of parliamentarians and officials from Commonwealth countries in observing other international elections to develop those with less experience.
 4. To highlight the work of The Commonwealth and Commonwealth Parliamentary Association as international bodies with support for democracy and democratic process as core values.
 5. To release a short report on the assessment team's findings and recommendations.
 6. To consider and compare engagement in the election amongst young people and women voters.





CPA UK ELECTION ASSESSMENT MISSION

INTERNATIONAL OBSERVERS

BIRMINGHAM LADYWOOD

- Hon. Anthony Agius Decelis MP *Malta*
- Hon. Stephanus Bezuidenhout MP *Namibia*
- Hon. Raghav Lakhanpal MP *India*
- Hon. Justine Mukobwa MP *Rwanda*

BRIGHTON PAVILION

- Hon. Bijoya Chakravarty MP *India*
- Hon. Fitz Jackson MP *Jamaica*
- Mr Robert Peden *New Zealand*
- Hon. Sophia Swartz MP *Namibia*

EXETER

- Hon. Mian Abdul Mannan MNA *Pakistan*
- Ms Mahua Moitra MLA *India*
- Hon. Sebastien Pillay MP *Seychelles*
- Hon. Senator Nancy Ruth *Canada*

GLASGOW EAST

- Hon. Alfred Kwame Agbesi MP *Ghana*
- Hon. Tyrone Benskin MP *Canada*
- Hon. Senator Chrysologue Karangwa *Rwanda*
- Ms Tuatini Taggy Tangimetua *Cook Islands*

WATFORD

- Hon. Dr Shezra Mansab Ali Khan Kharal MNA *Pakistan*
- Hon. Devinder Shory MP *Canada*
- Mr Shukhrat Sirojiddinov *Uzbekistan*
- Mr Akmal Akhataliyevich Umirzakov MP *Uzbekistan*

WIRRAL WEST

- Hon. Anthony Bezzina MP *Malta*
- Hon. Senator David Smith PC QC *Canada*

