

Perspectives on the 2007 Election

Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

This year we would like to see free and fair elections, leading to a Parliament and government with legitimacy in the eyes of the people, and capable of providing effective and accountable governance. PNG needs to elect members to the House who will honour the Constitution and recognise the respective roles and functions of Parliament – the legislature, the Executive Government and Judiciary. The distinctions between these functions have become blurred in recent years, including between politicians and public servants.

PNG is not short of politicians; it is short of good politicians who understand the roles and responsibilities of politicians in a modern state, are dedicated to making a positive difference, but not trying either to supplant the roles of the public service or the private sector. PNG is also short of good public service managers, chosen on merit. A major function of the politicians in government is to ensure that the managers perform, whilst Parliament's role, apart from drafting legislation, is to ensure the executive govt, including Public Service, is kept honest and performing. Too many people contest, or are pushed into contesting, partly as it's the only way for communities to access resources. There's been a self-reinforcing cycle of cutting off operating funds from the public service then handing them out through national politicians, resulting in very parochial allocations, and encouraging the perception, as the Provincial Affairs Minister, Sam Abal remarked recently, that cash handouts are now widely considered to be development rather than the delivery of infrastructure and services.

Will 2007 provide a more transparent and fairer election process, and deliver greater numbers of successful candidates with vision and integrity as hoped for by the optimists? Or will it merely be business as usual?

This is the test for the reforms introduced over recent years (notably before 2002) on Limited Preferential Voting and Integrity of Political Parties or OLIPPAC; whether they

really create extra stability and a better reflection of people's wishes. OLIPPAC and reducing the period for votes of no confidence (though not by as much as some leaders wanted) have certainly helped ensure some political and policy stability over the past five years, which has provided valuable benefits, although at the expense of further undermining Parliament's already inadequate oversight role over executive government. The LPV bye-elections were largely peaceful and even in the highlands relatively orderly, even if in one or two bye-elections there were widespread reports of electoral abuse, notably vote-buying. These bye-elections were held with major scrutiny and police security presence, which will be heavily stretched in the General Election with 109 seats across the nation. Despite the Electoral Commission's brave words, the level of preparation, including the revised electoral roll has probably been deficient, the new voting cards (without photos) confusing in a substantially illiterate society, the police have been in some turmoil, split into unnecessary factions, whilst major areas of the highlands have been heavily armed and in some conflict. Many of these problems could have been avoided or resolved, given a bit more energy and determination – not just by one or two Ministers, but concerted action by the Government as a whole.

Apart from tribal-based conflicts in parts of the highlands around election time and despite wide public discontent over deteriorating infrastructure and services, there has long been a resignation to the process, warts and all. Somehow there's an acknowledgement of the deficiencies, but that one must play by the prevailing rules, however unsatisfactory. This is the only time people have a chance to influence events. Whilst a major driving force in some elections has been to punish the present team in office for hoarding too much of the wealth and jobs to themselves, at the local level and with few policies espoused, voting remains largely on the basis that it's our turn to access the benefits, and we'll use all the techniques available to achieve this end, whether by multiple voting, creating false house-lines, block voting, intimidation or destruction of ballot boxes. Of course in much of the country election is a more orderly process than in much of the highlands. The majority without doubt seek an orderly election and to have their chance to cast their votes individually, but a substantial but determined minority in some seats undermine the process.

Popular demands in recent years, for removing provincial governments and seeking more answerable local level governments, have been firmly ignored to date. The Organic Law applied in 1997 increased Parliamentarians control over resources. More recently the Friday night amendments allowing greater control by MPs over the provincial governments and granting the NCD Chairman discretionary powers of appointment demonstrated a further willingness to grab control over resources and diminish public accountability. The resulting outcry from Civil Society perhaps highlights an increasing desire by the public not to be marginalised from all decision-making processes, other than the five yearly election process. The recent Ministerial direction, for example, that forestry staff were not allowed to attend a forestry workshop because the Minister viewed policy as his exclusive role met with significant criticism from those fed up with closed-door decision-making, sometimes followed outside the law.

PNG has enjoyed several years of positive economic growth. One might expect a positive reaction at the polls. But only in 2006 and hopefully this year is this growth significantly above the population growth, and still not by much. It has been based upon some earlier reforms, fiscal restraint at least until 2007, monetary stability and substantially upon good commodity prices, and has improved business confidence, but has largely only benefited those in enclaves – the urban elite, especially property owners, employees in some industries, and producers of certain crops with reasonable transport access. The benefits have certainly not stretched far away from main centres or towards the less privileged.

Government has moved slowly too improve goods and services, although there have been a few positive policies and initiatives. But, as with the overdue increased funding for infrastructure and services in the 2006 & 2007 budgets, there is little capacity to implement or monitor, especially at the local level and with the development budget, and the hundreds of Trust Funds. Those services, such as communications, which could have been provided by the private sector have been retained by inefficient State-owned enterprises, which have largely failed to extend networks, reduce prices or restore reliability, despite growing profitability. Recent also overdue reforms to LLG funding,

have not apparently yet come to the attention of LLG presidents, let alone been implemented. So economic growth is neither yet adequate nor on a sustainable basis to impact much of the voting population, whilst costly pre-election gimmicks tended to back-fire in the 2002 election and may well do in 2007 amongst an increasingly sceptical if not necessarily reform-minded electorate.

But will the combination of new voting system and frustration with greater reported wealth but little tangible improvement in lives, encourage a real change in the way people vote....any real shift, especially in the highlands, to voting for people with vision and policies, rather than the requirement to vote for your close wantok (or for the election to be rigged...with block voting etc)? Have so many people, esp. in places like SHP, forgotten what a working administration should be like, or is there a sufficient current of desire and willingness to change and awareness of the options? There is certainly increasing interaction across the country, and awareness that some experience better governance than others; some manage district development grants better and more consultatively than others, for example.

Usually 50% lose their seats in National Elections, but in 2002, with a strong nationwide undercurrent, $\frac{3}{4}$ lost theirs. There seem to be strong undercurrents this time too, but whether voters have found anything to go to, rather than react against, I would not hazard a guess. There are many good candidates, and in the past several candidates have won on the basis of hard campaigning but little funding. Others have retained office through constituency respect for their local performance. Many others, however, have made it with the help of substantial external funding, including from some of the extractive industries; with logging the most notorious. Despite the Ombudsman's valiant efforts, there remains inadequate oversight, and deterrence against abuse, notably with action under the criminal code. For some idealistic winning candidates the cost and the demands from their community to deliver are too great, and they readily fall prey to untoward vested interests.

The current Government made a valuable commitment to improved governance with the restoration of the long-dormant Public Accounts Committee, but Parliament has long been underfunded it, and the committee system has been badly under or misused, providing ineffective oversight, whilst all the independent watchdog bodies have also been inadequately funded. Despite commissions of inquiry and the like, few leaders have ever been brought to task. Many people feel that improved oversight and penalties applied to political and public service leaders, and other staff, enough to warn potential miscreants against abuses, would be one of the most valuable steps in improving standards of politics and governance.

I won't give you any predictions for the 2007 Election, other than to say once again there'll be an extensive turnover; there'll be no outright party winner; independents will win a major number of seats and then affiliate with one or more of the powerful parties. Let's hope that from many of the good candidates, there'll be enough winners with integrity and understanding of processes, who'll come together to form a capable Government, ready both to tackle rather than sidestep major overdue issues but also to listen. Another critical outcome is to build up the capacity of Parliament to perform a meaningful oversight function of the executive and of proposed legislation, rather than be a rubber stamp.

Thank you.

