



The Commonwealth

**Interim Statement by
His Excellency Danny Faure
Former President of the Seychelles
Chairperson of the Commonwealth Observer Group
Antigua and Barbuda
19 January 2023**

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen, members of the press and the people of Antigua and Barbuda.

I have the honour to present the interim statement of the Commonwealth Observer Group for the 2023 Antigua and Barbuda general elections. This statement is based on our preliminary observations, on polling day and our engagement with a cross section of stakeholders in the past week.

It does not constitute our final report. We will be making that submission at a later date, once our assessments have been formally completed. Not only will we ensure that the electoral commission will be presented with a copy, but I have personally given my assurances to the Governor General and the Prime Minister that they will be presented with copies too. Furthermore, in the spirit of transparency, we intend to also make the report accessible to the people of Antigua and Barbuda and all stakeholders who have an interest in the further development of this country and its democracy.

ARRIVAL & GROUP MAKE UP

Our Group was constituted by the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, The Rt Hon Patricia Scotland KC, following an invitation from the government of Antigua and Barbuda.

We are a group of five prominent citizens from Jamaica, Kenya, Seychelles, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and the United Kingdom, supported by four staff members from the Commonwealth Secretariat. There are experts in law, politics, elections and the media. We arrived on 14 January and held meetings with a cross section of stakeholders despite the shortness of time available to us. We held

meetings with the government, opposition, independent candidates, electoral commission officials, media, youth, women, police, and associations representing local observers.

On election day, 18 January, we visited 16 constituencies- all, but Barbuda which we could not access due to logistical constraints. However, we held a virtual and fruitful conversation with the leader of the Barbuda People's Movement. We engaged with voters, polling officials, party agents and other local and international observers.

In accordance with our mandate, our assessment of the elections is based on national, regional, Commonwealth and International standards to which Antigua and Barbuda has committed itself, as underscored in the arrival statement we issued on 16 January 2023.

FINDINGS

I will now share some preliminary observations.

1. Yesterday, the people of this beautiful country reaffirmed their commitment to our shared values of democracy by exercising their right to vote, although the turnout was low at 67 per cent, the lowest in the last 20 years. We were pleased and encouraged by the calm and peaceful atmosphere in which polling took place. Eligible voters exercised their franchise. We believe that the results reflect the will of the people.
2. We acknowledge the active participation of Antiguan and Barbudans, the police and security services. In contrast to the number of female candidates, of which there were only 10, we were particularly encouraged to see significant support of the electoral process by women and young people especially with large numbers engaged as polling staff and party agents. Their professionalism, efficiency and dedication to follow due process and to work together in transparency is commendable; as was the long hours they spent away from work and family. Their dedication to democracy is admirable.

3. We recognise the efforts of youth groups and civil society organisations in facilitating voter's education despite the short and constrained timeline, restricted access to information and resources. We also commend the Antigua and Barbuda Electoral Commission's policies to facilitate voting by persons with disabilities and to prioritise seniors in the line-up.
4. Our team was given free and unfettered access to unobtrusively observe the polling procedures. I have also been encouraged by the passion, openness and frankness displayed by all stakeholders in our engagements. They helped us get a better appreciation of the electoral process as well as the hopes, disappointments, and aspirations of the people of Antigua and Barbuda.

RECOMMENDATIONS

However, certain key elements of internationally recommended standards must be looked into and I will focus on **three** in this preliminary statement:

1. Strong Institutions:

For democracy to thrive and be fully functional, there needs to be a clear separation of powers. With the evolution of democracy in Antigua and Barbuda, the emphasis now needs to be put on good governance based on the framework of independence, transparency, oversight and accountability.

2. The Media

There is a need to de-politicize the media landscape. It must be free, fair and inclusive. There is an urgent requirement to strengthen the regulatory framework. It is not proper to give unrestricted access to the government, while limiting access to other parties.

3. Transparency; The Representation of The People (Amendment) Act

Appropriate steps must be taken to ensure accuracy and transparency as it pertains to:

- Timely publication and updating of the voter's list;

- Balancing the protection of voters' data with the right of the public and all parties to access and challenge the voter's list;
- The efficiency of the tallying process by counting ballots at the polling stations;

CONCLUDING REMARKS

The electoral process has now ended. But the rebuilding and healing of a nation needs to continue proactively. The Commonwealth will stand by you.

We were saddened by the vitriol, personal attacks, acts of arson and vandalism that took place in the pre-election period. They should have no place in Antigua and Barbuda. The greatest test of leadership is now, all parties need to display magnanimity in victory and honour in defeat.

We urge all leaders of political parties, civil society organisations, faith based groups and the people of this beautiful country to join hands together in building bridges and creating the Antigua and Barbuda you want for the next generation. We call on the government to also implement our recommendations.

We thank the people of Antigua and Barbuda for their warmth and hospitality and we wish you all the best as you move forward.

Thank You and God Bless

-END-

The Commonwealth Observer Group Members are:

H.E. Danny Faure

Former President

Seychelles

Hon. Gideon Moi

Politician and former Senator

Kenya

Baroness Denise Kingsmill CBE

Member of the House of Lords

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Mr Orrette Fisher

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Ms Clare Keizer

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