

STATEMENT BY HON. BEN ABDALLAH BANDA ON THE RECENT UK ELECTIONS AND THE LESSONS LEARNT

Thank you Mr. Speaker for giving me the opportunity to make a statement on the recent elections of the UK and the lessons we as a nation can learn therefrom.

On Thursday, 8th June 2017, the United Kingdom went to the Polls to elect its 650 members of Parliament to the House of Commons. Mr. Speaker, by the Fixed Term Parliament Act 2004 of the UK, it is required that general election must be held on the first Thursday in May every 5 years.

Mr. Speaker, Hon. Zanetor Agyeman-Rawlings and I were privileged and fortunate to be part of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Election Assessment Team (CPA-UK) from the Saturday, 3rd to Thursday, 8th June, 2017. Mr. Speaker, CPA-UK is a member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association which is a network dealing with about 180 legislatures in 52 countries. The purpose of the CPA is to strengthen Parliamentary Democracy across the Commonwealth.

Mr. Speaker, I was the leader of a six (6) member Election Observation Team that was deployed to North Norfolk which is a Local Government District and also a Parliamentary Constituency which is situated on the East Coast of England. It has a population of about 101,149 with its District Council located at a town called Cromer. Mr. Speaker, the names of my team members were: HON. SHOBA KARANDLAJE (MP in the Indian Parliament), HON. MAURICE-WILLIAMSON (MP in the New Zealand Parliament), JULIET PENN an Election Supervisor (Electoral Commissioner) in the British Virgin Islands, LAUREN TAIT and PAWEL JARZEM BOWSKI who are both British and coordinators in my team.

Mr. Speaker, on Tuesday, 6th June, 2017, members of my team and myself met the Returning Officer of the Constituency by name STEVE BLATCH. On the same day we attended a Parliamentary hustings (debate) organized by the Baptist church at a Village called STALHAM where the only 3 candidates contesting the parliamentary seat namely, JAMES WILD (Conservative

Party), NORMAN LAMB (Liberal Democrats also the incumbent) and STEPHEN BURKE (Labour Party) attended. Earlier on in the day, a different Parliamentary debate had been organized by the Anglican Church of Cromer and hosted in the Church building.

Mr. Speaker, on the day of the election (8th June, 2017), polls were opened at 7:00 a.m. as required by Law. The Presiding Officers and Poll Clerks were at the polling stations by 6:30 a.m. Voting ended at 10 p.m.

Mr. Speaker every Polling Station is manned by one Electoral Officer and one or two Poll Clerks. In most Polling Stations that we visited, I saw one Presiding Officer and one Poll Clerk. Mr. Speaker, most of the Presiding Officers and the Poll Clerks I interviewed have worked as electoral officers for at least ten (10) years and have thus acquired considerable amount of knowledge and experience in the electoral process. It is required that every polling station must be wheel-chair accessible. However, disabled persons can ask the Presiding Officers in the Polling Stations or any other persons of their choice to mark their ballot papers for them. If a voter is unable to enter the Polling Station because of a disability, the Presiding Officer can take the ballot paper to him.

Mr. Speaker, in the UK elections people can vote in person, by proxy or by post. To vote by post, a voter needs to apply for a postal vote before the postal application deadline (23rd May, 2017). A ballot paper will then be sent directly to the voter before the polling day. The voter must then complete the ballot paper and a postal voting statement (which contains his name and signature) and return same to the returning officer before 10:00 p.m. (before voting ends).

Mr. Speaker on the Election Day, our team went round a number of Polling Stations and surprisingly, I did not see any party agent either before the opening of the polls, during the voting process or after the close of polls though they are not disallowed by law from being present. I did not also see any queues because the voting processes are not long and cumbersome.

Mr. speaker, voters in the UK elections are not obliged by law to show any forms of identification at the Polling Stations in order to vote though every

voter is given a Poll Card upon registration. All that a voter needs to do is to mention his name and address. Mr. Speaker, when I asked the returning officer, STEVE BLATCH whether in the absence of any form of identification at the Polling Stations someone could perpetrate fraud or double vote, he told me that the system has been tried and tested and that in his 12 year experience as the Returning Officer of North Norfolk, he has not witnessed any act of fraud on the part of any voter. He further indicated that voters have trust and confidence in the system.

Mr. Speaker every ballot paper has a unique number at the back of it. Hence before a ballot paper is given to a voter that unique number is written against the name of the voter on the voters register so that in case there is a dispute every ballot paper can easily be traced or identified with a voter. However this information is not open to the public, it is kept secret until otherwise ordered by a court when there is an electoral dispute.

Mr. Speaker at the close of polls, all the Ballot boxes were transported to a Count Centre in the District Capital (Cromer) where the ballot boxes were emptied and the papers counted. Mr. Speaker, it was only the Presiding Officers who saw to the transportation of the ballot boxes to the Centre without any Police assistance and without any Party Agents.

Mr. Speaker, I interacted with JULIET PENN who was a member of my team and the Electoral Commissioner of the British Virgin Islands which has a population of about 400,000. Mr. Speaker, she told me that in the British Virgin Islands, for every general election, they do advance (special) voting not only for the security agencies and the electoral officers but also the aged, the terminally ill and the disabled. This is to ease congestion on the Election Day, and to make voting for the above categories of people less inconvenient and least discouraging. The British Virgin Islands is a self-governing British overseas territory located in the Caribbean. Mr. Speaker, I think it is a good example we, as a nation, can emulate.

Mr. Speaker, as a nation, we need to grow and strengthen our State Institutions so as to deal with the seemingly unsurmountable issues of mistrusts, suspicions, politicization that have engulfed some of our State Institutions for some time now.

Mr. Speaker if UK can seamlessly run Parliamentary Elections in 650 constituencies and elect 650 MPs without any apprehension of attacks, snatches of ballot boxes, double voting, rigging of Elections and without the presence of Party Agents and the Security Agencies, I think Ghana can also do same with just about 275 constituencies less than half of the UK. There is no doubt that Ghana is maturing politically in our democratic journey. In fact, we are seen and rated as the shining star of Africa. Six (6) times we have run successful general elections to elect Presidents and Members of Parliament (MPs) without any let or hindrance and three (3) times the presidential baton has changed from one political party to a different political party. However, we need not be over complacent. There is a lot more we need and can do to improve on our democratic dispensation.

Thank you.

