COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION (CPA)

AKBAR KHAN

CPA SECRETARY-GENERAL

36TH SMALL BRANCHES CONFERENCE

"Continuing to Enhance High Standards of Performance of Parliamentarians"

DHAKA, BANGLADESH

2 NOVEMBER 2017

Opening Ceremony
• Dr the Hon. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, MP, Chairperson and President of the CPA Executive Committee

• Hon. Angelo Farrugia and Chairperson of the Small Branches

• Honourable officers of the CPA Executive Committee

• Distinguished Parliamentarians, Clerks, Ladies and Gentlemen

Good Morning and a very warm welcome to the 36th Small Branches Conference in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Thank you to the Host Branch for the inspiring opening cultural event.

It should never be forgotten that our smallest nations are the least polluters in the world but often the first victims of climate change and natural disasters. It is a pleasure to address you again this year and I thank the Honourable Chairperson of the Small Branches for inviting me to share this platform with him. I would also like to express on behalf of us all our tremendous gratitude to our host, the Hon Chairperson and President, Dr Chaudhury, and to her teams for the excellent arrangements and very warm welcome we have received since arriving in Dhaka.

Honourable Members

The main theme for this year’s Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference is ‘Continuing to enhance the high standards of performance of Parliamentarians’.

Within this overarching theme you have agreed to discuss four highly diverse but relevant sub-themes, relating, specifically, to the challenge of Small Branches meeting the same expectations of service delivery as larger branches; the importance of constantly innovating in the face of fiscal and human resource constraints; the role of Parliament in meeting the challenges of combatting corruption; and, protecting territorial waters.
Honourable Members

Taken in the round, I anticipate these topics typically reflect the breadth and depth of the diversity of issues that as parliamentarians you must understand and master as the elected representatives of your citizens.

But what of their relationship to the main conference theme you might well ask……..

In my view, as parliamentary democracies, we are united in our respect for diversity and inclusion; and aspire to elect representatives from as wide a background as possible to reflect society. This aspiration is underscored by the fact that the only formal qualification to parliament remains limited to little more than citizenship, age and electoral support.

However, with the growing complexity of the environments in which parliaments function, and the increasing public expectation that parliamentarians should conduct themselves more in line with the professional standards expected of the traditional professions, it is increasingly necessary in my view that parliamentarians upskill themselves with special knowledge and training required to meet the demands of their evolving professional roles.

Your presence here over the next two days is testament to the conference theme of ‘Continuing to enhance the high standards of performance as Parliamentarians’

Hon Members

Let me say a few words about some of the interesting topics you will be discussing on your agenda.

The first point I wish to make is to recognise the important milestone that was reached by the CPA at the 62rd CPC in London in electing its first Chairperson for the Small Branches, the Hon Anglu Farrugia MP, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Malta.
As many of you know, the CPA has convened a Small Branches conference since 1981 and today 43 branches are classified as small branches based on their jurisdictions having a population below 500K people.

The election of the first chairperson is a recognition of the enhanced focus that the Commonwealth family in general and the CPA in particular gives to small jurisdictions which reflects our value of equality of treatment. Whether large or small every jurisdiction has an equal voice.

The Commonwealth family unlike many other international organisations allows its small states leaders and parliamentarians to sit at the same table on equal terms with much larger players.

This helps to spotlight and amplify the successes, vulnerabilities and concerns of our smallest jurisdictions.

At this Conference, the Hon Small Branches Chairperson will be consulting you on his exciting proposals for a new small branches strategy following meetings held recently in Malta with regional small branches representatives.

This is the first strategy of its kind in the 106-year history of the CPA.

I ask you to join me in congratulating Hon Farrugia on this important step as he seeks to develop a more focused and coherent work programme to enable the CPA to better support small branches to meet their unique and specific needs.
Hon Members

Other key matters you will be discussing relate to how you bridge the gap between the high expectations of the public for service delivery against the reality of limited human and financial resources; and the importance of Parliament in meeting the challenges of combating corruption; and, protecting territorial waters.

Hon members

Honourable members. the capacity of parliaments to fulfil their unique constitutional oversight responsibilities is largely dependent on the capability of its parliamentary members to execute their roles.¹

In the area of service delivery, logistics and infrastructure whether a jurisdiction is large or small, its citizens will ultimately judge the success of democracy and in turn its elected representatives by whether the tide of economic growth lifts and leaves none behind.

In this context, globalization is facing its biggest challenge – for several decades the process of closer integration through the free markets of goods, capital, people and ideas has led to remarkable achievements and in many jurisdictions the standard of living has never been better.

According to the UN, globalization has led to more than 200 million fewer hungry people than 25 years ago and an increased number of boys and girls going to school.

Life expectancy has also increased for many of us. On the plus side, one could reasonably claim that the world is more equal between the smallest and the largest jurisdictions than it has ever been.

However, on the negative side it cannot be denied that the gap between the richest and the poorest has widened, tapping into a rage by ordinary people who feel left behind. Persistent

¹ See Lewis and Coghill – Parliamentarians Professional Development 2016
challenges remain around achieving targets for basic education, maternal mortality, hunger and gender equality.

It is evident that these are complex and intractable challenges that will require the views of a wide range of stakeholders to be heard.

Parliament is the primary place to promote people's freedoms and well-being and to improve governance and it is the only actor with a political mandate from the people to monitor the management of the state by the government.

In this regard, it is worth reflecting for a moment on the guidance offered from the 2017 World Economic Forum to those in public leadership positions such as yourselves.

The guidance offered focuses on delivering a sustainable growth agenda, which features higher investment in health, education, transport infrastructure, digital networks, training for youth and building up governance institutions that uphold the rule of law and eradicates corruption and investing in an effective civil service.

The result, it is anticipated is inclusive and sustainable growth thanks to citizens with portable skills creating higher employment, an interconnected transport network for conveying people and goods, a digital highway for spreading information and ideas, a functioning financial system for fuelling investment and a governance structure that ensures a level playing field for all citizens.

**Hon members**, the World Economic Forum touched on the importance of supporting governance institutions in eradicating corruption and upholding the rule of law.

UN Sustainable development goal 16 focuses on effective, accountable and inclusive institutions which includes Parliament.

Goal 16 should provide a new impetus for parliament to represent the people’s voices and interests in the oversight of government. In this area, there is clear research conducted by the
World Bank that better parliamentary scrutiny and oversight of public spending strengthens the democratic process and in turn, is linked to lower levels of corruption.

Ultimately, a strong parliament forces government to perform better than it would if it could not be questioned, challenged or sanctioned. But it is not only the role of parliament to provide ‘oversight’, the responsibility for oversight is widely distributed. And while parliament has a central role it is not the only actor.

In order to combat corruption, government ministries, specialised oversight bodies such as audit bodies, civil society and the media all have a role to play in providing a rich tapestry of oversight.

**Hon members**

The importance of innovation is, and continues to be key when faced with limited capacity and resources. Recently writing in *The Parliamentarian* Journal, the former President of the Legislative Council of the Isle of Man, The Hon Claire Christian highlighted the importance of cooperation between Small Branches.

In the article, she noted that through co-operation, *links have gone beyond dialogue and grown into different forms of practical support for one another’s parliamentary systems. Within the sphere of parliamentary practice and procedure…. When we look to jurisdictions of our own size, we are much more likely to find ideas which will be of direct use back home,* [end quote].

**Hon members**

Your conference will also discuss *The role of Parliament in meeting the challenges of protecting territorial waters*. 

This is an increasingly important subject not only for the blue economy of a country, but also for its maritime security and reflects the growing international dimension to a Parliament’s work. Parliament has a key role in legislating to ensure the country has the legal ability to manage
its maritime resources. Without legal delimitation, it is very difficult to police and address criminality such as piracy or illegal and unregulated fishing.

Uncertainty over boundaries and entitlements can lead to conflict over access to resources, stifle investment and hinder the development of alternative energy resources. It can also undermine the potential of the seas as an economic resource for fisheries, tourism, minerals and marine biotechnology.

Even though many of our small Commonwealth jurisdictions are entitled under the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea to increase their ocean space and make ‘extended continental shelf submissions’, several small and vulnerable jurisdictions have yet to agree on maritime boundaries with their neighbours losing vital economic opportunities.

The Commonwealth, for nearly three decades, has provided advice and technical assistance to help small jurisdictions exercise their legal rights thereby unlocking the value of the blue economy and by promoting ocean governance.

I hope that Goal 14 of the Sustainable Development Goals which states: ‘Conserve and sustainably use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development’ will help to provide a new impetus for parliaments which have not already done so, to legislate in this area.

Hon Members, before closing, I wish to take this opportunity to outline one of the many new initiatives being introduced as part of the CPA Revised Programmes strategy. One of the programmes which has generated great interest is the Parliamentary Fundamentals Course on Practice and Procedure specifically designed and delivered for Small Branches by McGill University in Montreal, Canada.

I am delighted to say to you today that we have now completed year 1 of this programme and thirteen of your colleagues have now been awarded certificates for successfully completing the course. As many of you may know the McGill programme is specifically aimed at providing
parliamentarians from small branches with the necessary skills and tools to help them continue to enhance their high performance in the conduct of parliamentary procedure and practice.

Hon members, our aim for this programme is to deliver this annually over the next 3 years to twenty-five parliamentarians each year from Small Branches. There is significant investment being put into parliamentarians from Small Branches and I will encourage all of you present today to consider applying to undertake this programme in the coming.

To conclude, Hon Members you have some very challenging topics to navigate over the next two days. I am confident you will find solutions to take home with you.

In the course of your deliberations, I hope we can all take a moment to spare a thought for several of our smallest and most vulnerable small branches in the Caribbean who have been so tragically affected by the recent hurricanes and are therefore unable to attend the 63rd CPC. Our thoughts and prayers are with them for the speedy recovery of their nations.

Finally, Hon Members, knowledge transfer is the key foundation block upon which abilities and skills are built. This conference and its discussions exemplifies the importance of knowledge transfer and our deep-rooted Commonwealth approach across our membership of learning from one another through the exchange of ideas.

These aspects, I believe to be some of the many strengths of these annual gatherings - to nurture our networks, to share and exchange, to be mutually supportive of one another.

I wish you all an enjoyable and rewarding conference.

Thank you very much.