COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION

MR JOE OMORODION

ACTING SECRETARY-GENERAL AND DIRECTOR OF FINANCE

WELCOME MESSAGE ON 2 DECEMBER 2014

AT THE

INFORMATION & COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGY (ICTs) AND PARLIAMENTARIANS PROGRAMME FOR THE CARIBBEAN, AMERICAS & THE ATLANTIC REGION

HYATT REGENCY TRINIDAD

A joint event by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation

2 - 3 December 2014

- Hon. Wade Mark, Speaker of the House of Representatives
- Hon. Rupert Griffith, Minister of Science and Technology
- Honourable Ministers
- Ms Jacqui Sampson-Meiguel, Clerk of the House
- Mrs Nataki Atiba-Dilchan, Clerk of the Senate
- The Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation
- Hon. Members
- Resource Persons
- Members of the Media
- Ladies and Gentlemen

A Very Good Morning to you All.
I am delighted to welcome to this joint programme on information and communication technology and Parliamentarians for the Caribbean, Americas and the Atlantic Region!

This event has been organized by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation. We are honoured and pleased that it is hosted by the CPA Trinidad and Tobago Branch at this timely moment. The CPA Trinidad and Tobago Branch has always been a very active and engaging Branch throughout its Membership of the CPA and we very much value its consistent and ongoing contributions, hospitality, guidance and support.

I don’t doubt that we all agree that ICT has revolutionized our way of communicating in unimaginable ways: ICT operates outside of geographical limits and traditional time constraints – anytime, anywhere! It has have not only infiltrated our homes and workplaces in a very short space of time, but also enabled each individual to have a voice and access an abundance of information. This technology is not only for the pioneers who have invented and absorbed it, it has become the tool of many individuals to express their opinions and raise their concerns. I presume you all agree with the statement that easy access to information from around the world has the potential to promote liberty, competition and choice. This is the time when the reign of large media houses is being challenged by reversal communication hierarchies: Information
comes now from the bottom and rises up, as it is best exemplified with the rise of Twitter: We have already witnessed that Twitter often publicizes news before most mainstream media do: for example, in January 2009, the US Airways flight 1549 hit a flock of geese shortly after take-off, stalling its engines. **Pilot Chesley Sullenberger** calmly glided the powerless Airbus and its 155 passengers towards Manhattan’s River Hudson and it landed in the water with minimal injuries – right in the centre of the city!

Onlooker **Jim Hanrahan** broke the news of the daring escapade on Twitter, a full fifteen minutes before the mainstream news outlets did. "**I just watched a plane crash in the Hudson,**" he typed, with typical Twitter understatement. Other tweeters followed, including those posting the first images of the crash.

For yourselves, being public representatives, ICT can not only be a tool to listen and understand your constituents better, it can also provide the people with the information they need to hold you, their representatives, accountable in a more transparent system of governance.

Therefore, there is no doubt that ICT must be used by Parliaments, governments and political parties as it is a highly effective tool to involve and inform citizens in public policy-making and in the formation of governments. This can, in turn, re-enforce public trust in the role MPs are playing on the people’s behalf.
Social media can empower the public in a way that is far faster, cheaper and more pervasive than other forms of communication. They encourage pluralism, reach young people more than other media and encourage greater participation, accountability and transparency.

This is especially true for small and isolated users, which can link into the stream of global knowledge and information, and hereby strengthen their inter-linkages with the rest of the world. Consequently, the integration of small states into the global knowledge and communication hubs will be strengthened, overcoming geographical boundaries in real time.

This will not only transcend geographical boundaries, but also enable massive knowledge transfer between the developed and developing world. Does any one of you remember when you needed to calculate the weeks it would take a letter to reach St Vincent and Grenadines from London? I do. And it certainly makes a huge difference for our work that we were able to bridge delays in communication with our Branches all over the Commonwealth.

ICT is crucial to reducing poverty, improving access to health and educational services and creating new sources of income for the poor. Being able to access and use ICT has become a major factor in driving competitiveness, social development and economic
growth. In the last decade, ICT, particularly mobile phones, has also opened up new channels for the free flow of ideas and opinions.

Parliamentarians can use their unique status in such media as Facebook and Twitter to interest people in politics and political issues. Social media have been effective in election campaign fund-raising, especially encouraging small contributions from individual voters.

The Obama presidential campaign in 2008, for example, used social media to solicit donations. The campaign had more than 13 million addresses it could use to contact voters and encourage them to vote.

ICT has not only given the public a voice, it has also revolutionized the way we work and the speed in which we process information. It has not become a challenge to obtain information, but how to channel our intake towards reliable materials as well as verify our sources.

In the UK, where the CPA Headquarters is based, Parliamentary debates are now being broadcast live, Parliament even has its own television channel! Live broadcasts are a great tool for increasing parliamentary transparency and accountability.
ICT has also revolutionized the way Members review bills and access past statutes. You are not bound to a certain place anymore to access information that is vital to your work: A lot of information is, indeed, only a fingertip away from you, anytime, **24 hours a day!** And we are still looking at exhausting the full potential of ways to engage with the new technology. It is not only your Parliament who engages with you, or yourselves engaging with your voters, it is also the voter engaging with the democratic system, by opening up new ways of political involvement such as e-voting.

With each individual being able to use the same communication channels, transcending hierarchies, borders, continents and cultures, **new strategies are needed** to engage your audience and manage information.

This brings me to the **possible pitfalls** of the new technologies, which are inherent in them, as they are with most inventions: The uncontrolled nature of social media postings means they can be misleading and manipulative and can misinform. Irresponsible and irrelevant material can overload readers and swamp genuine political reporting and comment – and the capacity of individuals as well as institutions to deal with them. **The unguarded use of social media can also prove costly to you as Members of Parliament!** We saw this happen to a Shadow Attorney General and MP in the UK in **the last few weeks** – who, in the process of a simple tweet, lost her
job! All she tweeted was: “Image from #Rochester” with a tweeted picture of a modest terraced house decked in England flags, with a white van parked in the drive. The subtext was clear enough for the opposition to seize upon!

While information on the internet cannot be controlled, it can be used to spread disinformation or increase their influence inordinately. Social media invades privacy and allows governments, MPs and others to tailor information to what the public wants rather than what they need to know. Online security and cybercrime have become immense issues and we still do not understand the full extent of potential threats.

For these reasons and many more I have not mentioned, this Workshop has long been overdue. We are pleased that the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation, with whom the CPA signed a Memorandum of Understanding in 2011, is working with us on this important body of work. Given that ICT evolves constantly, we are looking to conduct this area of work around the Commonwealth, and we are very excited about the fact that the CPA Caribbean Region is pioneering this Workshop to be held in their region. In fact, our late SG, Dr William F. Shija, was very fond of the Caribbean Region. The last programme he attended before he passed on was the Benchmarks and Caribbean Regional Conference in Barbados last July/August.
I too have been a strong supporter of the region since I joined the Association 8 years ago, not only because of historical links, but also for the many good friends I have had the pleasure to make before and since taking up my employment with the CPA.

As you all know, the CPA does not tell you what to do. We only show you examples of how other Parliaments and Legislatures handle their affairs and whether some things are worthwhile to try and adapt to your circumstances. This is the reason why we would like to encourage you to own this programme. It has great potential, but it also is what you make of it.

Your knowledge and experience, honourable Members, is vital for its success. Do contribute and share. Do agree and disagree. Do tell us what the rise of ICT means for your work as a politician.

Be creative in telling your colleagues how parliamentarians, constituents and political institutions could explore the full potential of ICT. Do tell us if you have leading examples on how you changed your interaction with your constituents on the basis of using these new technologies.
With this short introduction, I would like to wish you **two very engaging, rewarding and successful days**. And just in case you might be wondering, **the CPA hashtag for this meeting is #CPAICTS**. I hope for a very intensive engagement in person and online and wish you all the best in your deliberations.

Thank you very much indeed, and God Bless You All.