Commonwealth Parliamentarians in the Caribbean explore ways of leveraging ICTs

3 December 2015, Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago: At a joint two-day workshop held in Port of Spain, organised by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) and the Commonwealth Telecommunications Organisation (CTO), hosted by the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago, Commonwealth Parliamentarians of the Caribbean, Americas & the Atlantic Region examined their role in developing ICTs and the ways in which ICTs could assist Parliamentarians to link with their constituents.

Following a successful workshop held by the two organisations in 2013 on ICT legislation, this workshop focused on two key aspects; how to legislate effectively on ICTs and how to use ICTs for the parliamentary process.

On the first day of the workshop, the delegates heard from experts and various stakeholders including policy makers, regulators and operating companies about their needs and priorities. Having considered these inputs in the context of the experiences of some developed ICT markets, the delegates identified the following as key points to be considered when developing legislation to govern ICTs.

- The expertise available within the public sector has to constantly improve, in line with the advances in the ICT sector
- Legislation should take into account the interests and priorities of all stakeholder groups so that the ICT sector is equally rewarding for all the stakeholders
- Legislation needs to develop dynamically in-step with the technological developments
- Legislation should not be too granular in order to remain relevant in the fast developing technological landscape, utilising subsidiary legislation and regulation to address specific issues
- Legislation should be sufficiently robust to ensure compliance
- Implementation should be built in to legislation
- Legislation must be developed to effectively protect citizens against online criminal activity such as cyber bullying and the exploitation of children
- The importance of having an independent regulatory body is paramount

On the second day of the workshop, a key note address informed the delegates of the plans for the proposed transition of the stewardship of the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority (IANA) of the Internet Corporation for Assigned Names and Numbers (ICANN) to a multistakeholder partnership. The presentation dealt with the agreed timelines of the process and the consultations held so far.

The delegates heard from industry experts and other Parliamentarians of the use of ICTs for Parliamentary process including the ways in which Parliamentarians could use social media to strengthen their engagement with their constituents. Applying these practices to their particular region the delegates decided upon the following as a key points to consider when Parliamentarians are using ICTs:

- ICTs facilitate closer communications with constituents and have the ability to reach a wider stakeholder group, in an environmentally friendly manner, though the use of power has an environmental impact;
- ICTs enable Parliamentarians to keep up with the times and be relevant to the modern generation. However the cost of using ICTs could be a negative factor if not managed properly;
• ICTs improve transparency and facilitate greater participation of the electorate;
• Information disseminated using ICTs cannot be easily recalled. Thus it is important to verify the information before publication and determine carefully what to place online in the public domain;
• When using ICTs it is important to create clear boundaries between information to be disseminated and not be disseminated. Particularly, it is advised to avoid sharing personal information;
• ICT channels are open to abuse which calls for strong mechanisms for both data security and physical security;
• Though ICTs facilitate fast and easy dissemination of information, it may come across as impersonal and the need remains to have the face-to-face interaction with constituents;
• ICTs could help Parliamentarians process a vast amount of data in many intricate forms including the demographics and voter profiles using data analytics as a tool, but strong data protection mechanisms are imperative;
• Adopting ICTs require Parliamentarians to keep up with the speed of communications of their interlocutors and to tackle many complexities in issues, which may become a heavy demand on their time;
• Setting up an integrated management system, to serve Parliamentarians individually and regionally, drawing lessons from good practices from outside the region, and keeping the use of ICTs within the local context would improve the use of ICTs by Parliamentarians; and
• The CPA and CTO should work closely with Parliamentarians in the CPA Caribbean, Atlantic and Americas Region with a view to assist in the implementation of these measures over the next two years and that a seminar should be held within two years to review the implementation of these recommendations...thank you Jamaica and Bermuda for offering to host!

We all unanimously express our sincere gratitude to the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago for hosting this important seminar.