KEYNOTE PLENARY SPEECH MADE AT THE 63rd COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

DHAKA, BANGLADESH

‘Continuing to enhance the high standards of performance of Parliamentarians’.

MR AKBAR KHAN

SECRETARY-GENERAL

COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION
• Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina, Honourable Prime Minister of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh and Vice Patron of the CPA
• Madam Chairperson, Honourable Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, Speaker of the Parliament of Bangladesh
• Distinguished Ministers, Parliamentarians, Presiding Officers and Speaker, CPA elected Officers, Clerks, and Ladies and Gentlemen

Assalamu Alilkum.

A very warm welcome to the 63rd Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference here in the vibrant city of Dhaka, in Sonar Bangla, the Golden Bengal: Bangladesh.

I wish to start by expressing on behalf of us all our enormous gratitude to our host, the CPA President and Chairperson, the Hon Dr Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury MP, and to her teams for the excellent arrangements and very warm welcome since arriving in Dhaka.

I also take this opportunity to recognise Her Majesty The Queen, the Patron of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, for her best wishes for a successful Conference and for her message of support to us
all. She has been the golden thread of unity through our diverse Commonwealth of nations and an inspiring and devoted Patron to the CPA.

Hon Members

It gives me great pleasure to participate in the Opening ceremony this morning speaking alongside such distinguished female politicians, such as Her Excellency Sheikh Hasina MP, the Honourable Prime Minister and Her Excellency, Dr. Chaudhury, Honourable Speaker of Bangladesh Parliament, who have contributed so much to their nations’ global leadership and its stability and prosperity.

In this context, Bangladesh is one of only 11 countries in the world to have a female Head of Government and one of only 54 national parliaments globally to have a woman speaker of parliament.

Standing here, I cannot help but feel humbled amongst such outstanding female talent – maybe the former British Prime Minister, the Rt Hon Margaret Thatcher did have a point when she remarked: ‘In Politics, if you want anything said, ask a man. If you want anything done, ask a woman’.
Hon Members

We gather here this week to reaffirm and celebrate our Commonwealth political values. Values of democracy, separation of powers, rule of law, and human rights. Values which unite us in our diversity and which are emblematic of our Commonwealth’s democracies.

Hon Members:

As you all know very well, each Parliament is a unique institution reflecting its own special historical evolution. However, what all parliaments have in common is a capacity to strengthen democracy by acting as powerful agents of change.

But for parliaments to act as powerful agents of change, its members must have the capabilities and necessary support to execute their parliamentary and constitutional responsibilities.

This year’s conference theme ‘Continuing to enhance the high standards of performance of Parliamentarians’ is very appropriate, focusing as it does on the importance of development for parliamentarians, and in turn, parliament’s performance as an independent pillar within the separation of powers.

As the Rt Hon. David Carter, the outgoing New Zealand Speaker observed in 2016: ‘If we want a true House of Representatives, with a
diversity that is reflected in the backgrounds of our members’. ‘We shouldn’t then be surprised if some of them arrive having had minimal exposure to reading and analysing legislation, Public policy development or the myriad of other activities that a member is required to perform on a day to day basis.’ The outgoing Speaker further observed that new members need to equip themselves to become effective parliamentarians, but they cannot do so in isolation and without support.

**Hon Members:**

The Honourable Speaker’s observations go directly to the heart of our conference theme which also raises two important questions, namely:

- What are the ‘high standards’ that are expected from parliamentarians?
  and,

- Why does this all matter?

Turning to the ‘high standards’ expected of parliamentarians;

As ‘elected officials’, parliamentarians occupy ‘a position of trust and authority.’

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1 Speech of the Rt Hon David Carter MP, ‘Orientation and Development of Parliamentarians’, 2016 at the Commonwealth Speakers’ and Presiding Officers’ Conference
As public officials, parliamentarians are ‘obliged to act in the interests of others and practice high standards of behaviour’.

The greater complexity of the environments in which parliamentarian’s function makes it increasingly necessary that, as professionals, they possess special knowledge and skills to enable them to discharge their parliamentary and constitutional functions.²

Hon. Members

In 2006, the CPA led the development of a seminal piece of work setting out the benchmarks or standards expected of a functioning democratic legislature.

‘The Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures’ as this body of work is known, made explicit reference to ‘Professional and Public Capacity-Building’ suggesting that parliamentarians should be given access to professional development programmes to prepare them to participate more effectively in the democratic process.³

In 2015, the CPA further developed its benchmarks work in the field of codes of conduct applying to Members of Parliament.

² Lewis and Coghill ‘Parliamentarians’ professional Development’, 2015
³ See Commonwealth Parliamentary Association et al., 2006, page 2019
Even though the professionalisation of members of parliament is clearly invaluable to promoting a stronger trusting relationship between parliamentarians and the public, there still remains a reluctance from some parliamentarians to participate in upskilling opportunities.

Some members explain this on the basis they are just ‘too busy’ to participate in such opportunities, while others will say there is little if anything left for them to learn about.

A further group are keen to know what the CPA will do to help capture their experience during their time in parliament for use in their post-parliamentary careers.

The CPA has listened carefully, and through its new and diverse range of programmes, has responded positively to the challenges. By using technological innovations, our CPA President, Dr Chaudhury, is launching its new series of Masterclasses at this conference.

These ‘bite-sized’ briefings and analyses prepared by Parliamentarians and Experts capable of being accessed remotely aim to be the ‘go to resource’ on a range of parliamentary practice and procedural matters.
Hon Members

Although ‘remote’ learning, is key to widening access to opportunities, it can never fully replace the value of ‘face-to-face’ learning and the relationships and networks that result from the coming together of members.

This is why earlier this year the CPA, in partnership with two distinguished Commonwealth universities, launched the CPA Parliamentary Fundamentals course.

Parliamentarians can now benefit from both a week-long, face-to-face course, which on completion will lead to a Postgraduate certificate. This qualification not only continues to enhance the high standards of performance of parliamentarians but also confers a formal recognition of a parliamentarian’s experience which may be useful in post-parliamentary life.

It is also very pleasing to see the development of parliamentary training opportunities being provided by CPA branches not only for their own Members, but being made widely available to others across the CPA network, such as the ‘CPA Canadian Parliamentary Seminar’ which has just concluded its 14th workshop to share Canadian good practice with other Commonwealth jurisdictions.
Or the CPA UK’s ‘Westminster Seminar’ which will conduct its 65th seminar later this month exploring differing approaches to parliamentary practice and procedure in the context of the Westminster System.

Likewise, the vitally important role of upskilling parliamentary staff to support members and the institution of parliament can be seen in the establishment of specialised training institutes to meet the growing developmental needs of parliamentary staff.

In this context, I am pleased to announce that the CPA will for the first time deliver its own accredited training course in partnership with McGill University, Canada for parliamentary staff in Kenya, hosted by the Kenyan Centre for Parliamentary Studies, to ensure the course is more easily accessible to CPA Parliamentary staff.

Finally, on our conference theme let me say a few words about why all this matters!

Today, we have more democratically elected parliaments in the world, with more new, or first-time parliamentarians than ever before.

In many of our Commonwealth parliaments, the turnover of parliamentarians is high – over 70% in some Commonwealth legislatures. Our upskilling work is never complete, as Members not returning to parliament take with them a vast amount of institutional knowledge and
expertise, and leave fewer returning parliamentarians to help guide and mentor newly elected parliamentarians to navigate the complexities of parliamentary life.

Parliamentarians do not have a job description on entering parliament. As one academic has put it, “*Those elected to public office are expected to possess indefinable qualities to accomplish an indescribable job.*” Given the unique nature of parliamentary careers and the absence of any comprehensive training to prepare for the evolving demands of the job, it is essential for them to receive and be supported in their ongoing development to be effective.

**Hon. Members**

Continuing to enhance the high standards and performance of Commonwealth parliamentarians has been the mission of the CPA since it was established some 106 years ago.

During the past three years, the responsibility of leading this distinguished Association has been on the shoulders of our able President and Chairperson, the Honourable Dr Shirin Chaudhury MP.

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As Dr Chaudhury nears the end of her term of office, I hope you will allow me to share a few moments together to celebrate some of the significant achievements she has made during her tenure:

- Through her various representational activities, our Chairperson has taken great care to build relationships across all CPA’s regions – in doing so, she has strengthened the unity of the Association through respect for diversity and inclusion;
- Dr Chaudhury’s commitment to inclusion of Commonwealth youth in political life led to her launching the CPA Roadshows last March here in Dhaka. These Roadshows, which are unique in showcasing the Commonwealth and the importance of parliamentary democracy, have now reached over 15,000 young people across the Commonwealth.
- And this week our President and Chairperson, will launch the CPA Youth Roundtable – a new and innovative way of incorporating the voice of young people into this prestigious Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference;
- But it is her leadership in translating the values of the Commonwealth into tangible gains for the Association through renewing and reinvigorating its programme strategy, contributing to the resolution of the issues of the Association’s status, and
promoting respect for diversity and good governance of the Association that will be her enduring legacy as she leaves behind a CPA truly fit for the challenges of the 21st century.

Honourable Members, please join me in giving a round of applause for the Honourable Chairperson, Dr Chaudhury.

In closing:

I wish to express my sincere appreciation and thanks to all CPA Branches who have hosted CPA programmes in the past year and for their warm welcome when I, or my staff have visited their branches.

I especially send our sincere wishes to those Caribbean branches with whom we have worked with so closely this year and who have been so tragically affected by the recent hurricanes. On behalf of the CPA family we send our heartfelt wishes to them for a speedy recovery, they will not be forgotten here in Dhaka, and we look forward to their attendance at the 64th CPC.

I also wish to express my deep appreciation to the outgoing Vice-Chairperson of the Executive Committee, the Hon Emilia Lifaka, Deputy Speaker of the National Assembly of Cameroon, and to all members of the CPA Coordinating Committee for their guidance, and to the Executive
Committee for their dedication and commitment to creating a positive trajectory for the CPA.

**Hon. Members**

I hope you will agree with me that no matter where we are in life, if we keep on learning we will succeed. I wish everyone a very successful 63rd Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. Thank you.

*Sunday 5th November 2017*

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