CPA Post-Election Seminar for
the Legislative Council of
St Helena
20-27 January 2018

Opening Remarks
Delivered by Ms Meenakshi Dhar on behalf of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Secretary-General, Mr Akbar Khan

Opening ceremony
Monday 22 January 2018
• Her Excellency, the Governor
• Honourable Eric Benjamin MBE, Speaker of the Legislature of St Helena
• Honourable Ministers and Members of Parliament
• Mrs Gillian Francis, CPA Branch Secretary for the Legislative Council of St Helena
• Mr Barry House, formerly President of the Legislative Council of Western Australia
• Mr Roger Phillips, Clerk of Tynwald, Secretary of the House of Keys and Counsel to the Speaker of the Parliament of the Isle of Man
• Distinguished guests

Honourable Members, Distinguished Guests

Good Morning,

It is a great pleasure and a privilege to be here in beautiful St Helena to deliver these Opening Remarks on behalf of the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Mr Akbar Khan.

The Secretary-General was very much looking forward to personally attending this CPA Post-Election Seminar but due to a change in the dates, his prior travel commitments could not be reconciled to allow him to attend in person. He is deeply disappointed not to be here in person, but has asked me to convey his very best wishes for a successful seminar and his personal thanks to the Honourable Speaker, his team, and the CPA Resource Team for their willingness to participate in this important event.

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The Secretary-General’s Opening Remarks follow:

H.E. The Governor, Honourable Speaker, Hon. Members, Branch Secretary, and distinguished guests. Let me start in joining the Honourable Speaker in welcoming you to this CPA Post-Election Seminar and to thank him, and also Mrs Gillian Francis for their generous hospitality shown towards the CPA’s distinguished Resource Team, who have travelled from around the
world to be here in St Helena, nicknamed the ‘Galapagos of the South Atlantic’, because of its beautiful environment, to share their substantial knowledge and experience with you this week.

Honourable Speaker, Distinguished Guests, Citizens of St Helena, congratulations on holding a successful election last July! Your recent election has demonstrated your commitment to the shared values of the Commonwealth and the Commonwealth Charter from which I quote: “We recognise the inalienable right of individuals to participate in democratic processes, in particular free and fair elections in shaping the society in which they live.”

Although the election campaign is now over, this is not the end of the road. To the contrary, it is the beginning. Election to this legislature signifies the beginning and continuation of parliamentary careers and, above all, service and responsibility to the people of this Island.

As the well-respected Election observer, Dame Audrey Glover, once observed ‘Elections cannot of themselves bring about democracy, but it is not possible to have democracy without elections. They enable people to express their preference for those they would like to govern them and thus bring security and stability. Furthermore, elections are a cornerstone of democracy and a celebration of human rights because they embrace the right to freedom of association and assembly, freedom of the media, freedom of opinion and expression and the right to vote.’

In my role as the Secretary-General of the CPA, I have had the great fortune of visiting many CPA Branches around the Commonwealth and meeting Members of our CPA family. The
British Overseas Territories, with their rich cultural and democratic heritage, are incredibly important and valued, full members of the CPA.

For Members of the St Helena Legislature, in your remote location in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean, the CPA provides a vital network of Commonwealth Parliamentarians and the sharing of best practice through our publications like ‘The Parliamentarian’, our online resources and social media channels. The CPA offers an opportunity for you as Members of your Legislature to connect with Members across the Commonwealth from Malaysia to South Australia; British Columbia to Sri Lanka. We greatly look forward to continuing this partnership with St Helena this week.

The historic charter flight of 3rd May 2017 that landed at St Helena Airport carrying 60 passengers ushered in a new chapter in the history of this Island. As Councillor Derek Thomas rightly remarked on that day ‘What a great day for St Helena to receive our first flight of passengers’.

The opening up of St Helena to the world will undoubtedly be transformative in so many ways for this Island. For the CPA, it offers the opportunity for us all within the network to learn more about the good practices here from one the CPA’s smallest Branches while at the same time sharing with St Helena views on good practice from visiting CPA members, amongst others.
I hope this CPA Post-Election Seminar will in time be emblematic of the mutuality of learning between this Island and the rest of the CPA network and vice versa, which is so much part of the life blood of the CPA family.

**Honourable Members,**

Founded in 1911, the CPA at 107 years of age, is one of the oldest networks in the Commonwealth. Our purpose and vision, put simply, is to advance, strengthen and deepen parliamentary democracy. We do this through our range of capacity-building programmes for our Parliamentarians, through our benchmarks of democratic governance and by facilitating networks and cooperation between parliaments, legislatures and like-minded colleagues.

The CPA St Helena Branch has enjoyed an active and fruitful partnership with the CPA – most visibly with the active participation of Councillor Derek Thomas, who as the first member from St Helena to serve on the CPA International Executive Committee has been instrumental in supporting many of the reforms and new programmes introduced over the past two years of my tenure. Thank you, Councillor Thomas, for the immense support and distinguished service you have given the CPA during your three years on the Executive Committee.

It has also been very pleasing, for instance, to see the constitution of St Helena engage so well with the CPA’s *Recommended Benchmarks for Codes of Conduct applying to Members of Parliament* in the development and revision your own Code of Conduct applicable to members here.
More recently, our Technical Assistance Programme has delivered some key infrastructural improvements to the legislative buildings. We hope these improvements supplement the good work already being done here.

These are but a few examples of St Helena’s involvement in the life of the CPA, and this week presents a privileged opportunity to continue and deepen this successful working relationship. It is a relationship we value and will continue to nurture.

Honourable Members,

Over the past 20 years, the CPA has delivered close to 60 CPA Post-Election Seminars across the Commonwealth – the aim of which is to enable Parliamentarians, new and returning, to gain a broader understanding of the principles of parliamentary democracy and strengthen their skill sets. This is particularly poignant as we head towards the Commonwealth Summit in London and Windsor in April this year, bringing together old and new democracies, highlighting the breadth and depth of the Commonwealth.

With the constitution of St Helena approaching its 30th birthday, representative democracy is a well-established yet relatively young concept here. Whether a democracy is young or old, our Commonwealth experience tells us that developing a democracy is a continuous exercise that requires constant nurturing. And it is the reason why CPA Post-Election Seminars are so important.
Honourable Members,

The true measure and success of a democratic society is not confined simply to the organisation of elections. It encompasses values of responsibility and accountability where citizens young and old, men and women, disabled or able-bodied, whether acting privately or through free media or civil society, control the political process continuously beyond elections.

Pivotal to empowering citizens to take control and take ownership of political processes, is engaging citizens and taking steps to maximise participation in democratic processes.

It was therefore very encouraging to note the excellent way that last July’s election was communicated and explained to the public. In a digital age, harnessing tools such as social media to publicise elections and take the debate forward, is crucial to developing a mature democracy. It is important that this is continued in future elections.

Alongside this, as demonstrated by your excellent programme of educational talks and online resources for citizens interested in becoming councillors, it is evident that widening participation in democratic processes and encouraging positive engagement in politics is high on the agenda here. This further underscores your clear commitment to the Commonwealth values I mentioned a moment ago.

In this context, I am delighted that a focus on engaging the young people of St Helena also forms part of this week’s programme through the delivery of two CPA Roadshows to schools.
With over 60% of the Commonwealth’s 2.4 billion citizens currently under the age of 30 years, it is vitally important that young people, as leaders of today and tomorrow, are informed about the nature of Commonwealth political values and why the Commonwealth should matter to them in the 21st century.

Like many Branches in the Commonwealth, it is unsurprising that St. Helena does have some challenges.

Last July’s election unfortunately saw only 49% of eligible voters turn out to vote; a 6% decrease from the last election in 2013 and only 2% higher than the 2005 elections. This of course is something that is true for many Branches of the CPA. Voter turnout is a key indicator of a healthy democracy, and constitutes one of the key metrics used by Commonwealth Election Observers. A high voter turnout strengthens the mandate and legitimacy of legislatures and ensures proper scrutiny and accountability.

It is important that steps be taken to identify the reasons behind the low turnout and this Seminar provides a good opportunity to engage with colleagues facing similar challenges across the Commonwealth.

Honourable Members,

Her Excellency Governor Phillips correctly pointed out at the inaugural meeting of the new legislative council that the constitution of St Helena places ultimate responsibility for driving and delivering this vision with you – the elected representatives of St Helena. The future of this Island is firmly in your hands.
It is therefore of critical importance that, to echo the theme of our recent 63rd Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Bangladesh, St Helena continues to enhance the high standards of performance of its Parliamentarians.

In this context, let me reference the body of work that has been undertaken by the CPA to support you as Parliamentarians; and to promote the effective functioning of democratic legislatures to fully express the will of the people and involve them in governance.

The work that I refer to is the CPA’s *Recommended Benchmarks for Codes of Conduct applying to Parliamentarians* published in 2015 – which of course you have already adopted - and the *CPA Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures*.

The support on offer through the CPA goes beyond benchmarks and standards. Key to our working and approach is ‘peer to peer’ learning; bringing Parliamentarians together to share best practice and discuss common obstacles.

One such network is of course the CPA’s Small Branches, of which St Helena is a member. You will know that this network has existed as part of the CPA Family since 1981 and that its primary role has been to act as a vehicle for smaller jurisdictions of the CPA to address their unique and specific needs.

In the last two years, focus has been on strengthening the CPA’s network of Small Branches within the wider Association. As part of that work, Hon. Angelo Farrugia, Speaker of the
Maltese Parliament, was elected in 2016 as the first ever CPA Small Branches Chairperson. Hon Farrugia, in his capacity as the Small Branches Chairperson, now sits on the CPA Executive Committee as one of the five Officers of the Association, representing the views of CPA Small Branches. In October last year, the new Small Branches Chairperson convened a meeting of representatives from Small Branches to look at developing a Small Branches Strategic Plan. The proposed Strategic Plan will be presented to the Mid-Year Executive Committee Meeting for approval.

The proposed Strategic Plan includes a research element which will focus on identifying key requirements for CPA Small Branches. Additionally, it will also further the integration of Small Branches into wider CPA activities and improve information sharing and learning among Small Branches. Finally, it will also ensure the proper monitoring and evaluation of successes within the CPA Small Branches network.

Honourable Members,

We are here today in the spirit of shared learning and partnership. Our resource team has generously offered their time and travelled from around the world to be here and to work with you. They are here because they believe in the CPA’s vision, and share your own commitment to democracy and good parliamentary governance. They are:

- **Mr Barry House**, until recently President of the Legislative Council of Western Australia, and

- **Mr Roger Phillips**, Clerk of Tynwald, Secretary of the House of Keys and Counsel to the Speaker of the Parliament of the Isle of Man
The success of this seminar is incredibly important to the CPA; and I would like to thank most sincerely the Honourable Speaker and the Branch Secretary for hosting us. I wish you well in your deliberations and look forward to hearing about your successful and constructive seminar.

Thank you.

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