



COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION (CPA)

MR. AKBAR KHAN

CPA SECRETARY-GENERAL

35TH SMALL BRANCHES CONFERENCE

**"A Collaborative Commonwealth:
Unity, Diversity and Common Challenges"**

LONDON, UNITED KINGDOM

13 DECEMBER, 2016

Opening Ceremony

- Dr the Hon. Shirin Sharmin Chaudhury, MP Speaker of the Bangladesh Parliament and Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee
- Hon. Randolph Horton Speaker of the Bermuda House of Assembly and Small Branches Chairperson
- Members of the Executive Committee
- Delegates to the Small Branches Conference
- Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen

Good morning!

It gives me great pleasure to welcome to you the 35th Small Branches Conference here in London, United Kingdom.

I am delighted and honoured to be welcoming you to this Conference in my capacity as the 7th Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association.

Our Commonwealth family, is defined by our diversity comprising large and small member states, developed and developing, strong and weak, island and landlocked. As the Commonwealth we are also defined by the priority we give to supporting small states and by extension our small parliamentary branches.

For small branches, I believe the CPA is one of the best possible Parliamentary Associations where small braches can sit alongside larger branches in complete equality. This in turn helps to spotlight their best practice, their vulnerabilities and concerns and amplify their voices

Our network of Small Branches has, since 1981, convened at the CPC to discuss the unique and distinctive challenges facing Small Branches and to seek, through the

sharing of experiences strategies to strengthen our legislatures; making them more representative, responsive and accountable to the people they serve.

Whether a large or a small branch you will agree with me that the principal indicator of the success for any legislature or parliament must be the delivery to its citizens of the benefits of democracy and development and the difference it makes to their lives.

Through the warm welcome I have received from so Small Branches in the CPA represented here today, I have seen for myself during my branch visits some of the challenges facing small branches in seeking to deliver the benefits of democracy to their citizens.

These include but are not limited to:

- unequal power relationships between the Executive and the Legislature compromising the functioning of the separation of powers; this can be observed in members of the Executive treating the legislature as a rubber stamp, or not simply not turning up to the Chamber to face scrutiny and to be held to account;
- a lack of human and financial resources being allocated to the Legislature reducing its capacity to serve effectively and to better respond to the needs of constituents;
- the difficulties in developing functioning Scrutiny committees able to rigorously hold the Executive to account.

This first-hand expose to the peculiarities to Small Branches has underscored my determination to prioritise, in the CPA's programme of parliamentary strengthening the needs of Small Branches to better meet the benchmarks of an inclusive, transparent and gender equal legislature that reaches into communities to engage people in the democratic process.

Despite the many challenges facing small branches your experience shows that by adopting a pragmatic and responsive approach to the issues small branches face, rather than a prescriptive or rigid one it is possible for small legislatures to adapt to the

rapidly changing context in which they operate, which in turn helps to build their resilience.

You can be reassured that with the CPA Secretariat's renewed focus on supporting small branches that you will not be alone in addressing the several challenges of today and tomorrow.

Since assuming my role in January this year I have already sought to prioritise some of the challenges you face through the revised programmes strategy approved by the Executive Committee earlier this year.

An important first step that was taken early this year was to review the CPA Headquarters funding policy to support branch programme delivery. I have been acutely aware since assuming my role that small branches in particular have struggled to frontload the expenditure necessary to undertake activities to strengthen their CPA branch.

In consequence, I took up this long standing matter early on with support of Regional Secretaries and the late Treasurer Mr Muntanga, who was equally keen to resolve it. In June this year the CPA Secretariat issued new policy guidance to support the funding of member branches and regions programme delivery.

Under the new policy guidance branches can apply to the CPA headquarters to be advanced up to 75% of the financial amount required to deliver a diverse range of programme activity approved by the CPA International Executive Committee with reimbursement of the remaining balance after the programme activities have been completed.

This small but important funding development has already helped small branches to take forward their activities, most recently last month in the Pacific.

Honourable Members

A further important development to support small branches pioneered by the CPA Headquarters is the soon to be launched this week CPA Flagship Programme – **The**

Parliamentary Fundamentals Course on Practice and Procedure. This course is aimed at ‘upskilling’ newly elected or returning parliamentarians with the relevant skills and tools to help them become effective parliamentarians.

I am delighted to announce that there will be an accredited **Parliamentary Flagship course specifically designed for Small Branches**; the course will be developed and delivered in association with McGill University in Canada, having its first intake of 25 Parliamentarians in February 2017.

The Parliamentary Fundamentals Course goes to the heart of the CPA’s ambition – to strengthen parliaments and parliamentarians work to ensure that parliaments are effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

Honourable Members, The **United Nations Sustainable Development Goal 16** specifically relates to the development of strong institutions. In October this year, we convened joint study group of partners in parliamentary strengthening to review the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s ***Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures*** in light of the aspirations set out in Goal 16.

Effective parliaments are the principal institutions of the state, central to the attainment of SDG 16, the development agenda and all of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. The launch of the *Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures* in 2006 by the CPA and its partners was a bold and pioneering step to strengthen parliaments through the promotion of a set of standards for parliaments across the Commonwealth.

Today, at a time of increased scrutiny of parliaments and of parliamentarians, the focus on measuring impact and the need to demonstrate the effectiveness of legislatures is critical. The Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures provide a key tool in assisting parliaments to demonstrate their performance, increase their self-awareness and prioritise areas for development.

A decade on, SDG 16 offers a unique opportunity to revisit the expectations of a good and democratic parliament. We are developing a tool to help parliaments craft their

reform agenda in line with the aspirations of SDG 16; increasing effectiveness, accountability, transparency and becoming more inclusive and responsive institutions.

Honourable Members

The year 2016 is an historic year for the Small Branches of the Association: culminating today in the creation of the position of **Small Branches Chairperson**. I look forward to welcoming the new Small Branches Chairperson to the Executive Committee Table to represent the specific concerns of Small Branches. The establishment of this position signals the increased role to be played by Small Branches in the Association going forward and the importance of equality and inclusion in the CPA Governance structures. It also underscores democratic nature of our Association so that the small branches do not suffer the tyranny of the larger branches.

Honourable Members

Climate Change

One of the areas of discussion at this Conference is Climate Change; this is of particular relevance for your jurisdictions as many of you are vulnerable when it comes to the increasingly adverse effects of extreme weather, rising sea levels, and other incidences of often catastrophic proportions as a direct result of the impact of climate change.

It is of course a terrible irony that it is the smallest and the least polluters in our Commonwealth who are the first casualties of climate change.

It is notable that the Commonwealth comprises more than 25% of the signatories to the Paris Agreement, and represents 17% of global emissions of greenhouse gases. Given the strong international influence of its membership, the Commonwealth is in a good position to demonstrate added global value through effective action on climate change by ensuring its members work for the early enforcement of the Paris Agreement, thereby encouraging its prompt implementation.

This is particularly true when it comes to the 42 jurisdictions that make up the Small Branches of the Association. By virtue of your small size and limited resources, as well as the fact that many of your nations are low-lying island states, your jurisdictions face a number of common issues affecting climate resilience.

Collectively we have worked to ensure that as Parliamentarians, you have a role in the international Climate Change dialogue. I am sure that the discussions you have will bring about a heightened awareness not only of the commonality of the critical issues you face, but also an enhanced collaboration to meet the commitments of COP 21 and now COP 22.

Youth

Honourable Members, 60% of the Commonwealth's population of 2 billion is made up of young people below the age of 29.

Since I took up my position I have had the privilege of meeting Commonwealth young people at multiple CPA fora: at the Commonwealth Day Programme in London in March this year; during the 29 CPA Roadshows I have attended where I discussed the Commonwealth values of diversity, development and democracy with young people. I met many of these young people in small jurisdictions such as Montserrat, Guernsey, Jersey, Tonga and Bermuda.

As a father, I have often reflected on the challenges facing young people and children today across the Commonwealth and have often felt saddened at times by the appalling emotional and physical damage that adults have inflicted on their lives and their futures.

Sadly, one of the ongoing challenges facing our children in the Commonwealth today is abuse in its ugliest form that we cannot and should not shy away from confronting especially as a values based Association.

The 2015 Independent Report into allegations surrounding child safeguarding issues conducted by Sasha Wass QC is a siren call to us all that protecting children from abuse is an absolute priority.

As Parliamentarians, you hold the key role to protect young lives by ensuring their safety and wellbeing. This includes the passing of legislation, the monitoring and scrutinising of its implementation and ensuring that adequate resources are made available to the relevant agencies. Of particular importance is making sure that perpetrators are brought to justice and the victims of such heinous actions are supported.

If legislatures are not seen to be making material differences to the lives of its most vulnerable citizens, it would be failing in its moral duty.

I am therefore very pleased that the Small Branches will address in its discussions ***'The Role of Parliament in the Protection and Safeguarding of Children'*** as part of this Conference.

Lastly, let me commend the Small Branches in their active role in bringing women's issues and the barriers to political participation to the forefront of debate. This topic is crucial not only for Small Branches, but for all legislatures of the Commonwealth.

In Small Branches, however, the challenge for greater representation by women in the political sphere is particularly acute through reduced populations, violence against women, social and cultural barriers, unfavourable electoral and legal legislative frameworks can all prevent women from taking on greater leadership roles in society.

Although the percentage of women in world parliaments has nearly doubled in the last 20 years, this only translates into 22% percent of women in parliament today.

Women's parliamentary representation remains especially weak in the Pacific region where women represent an average of 4.2% of the elected representatives in the Pacific region.

Against this backdrop, I commend the tremendous achievement in Samoa through constitutional reform to enshrine a quota system aimed at greater female representation in their National Assembly.

As most of you are aware, this Conference will see the election of a new Commonwealth Women's Parliamentarian Chairperson. I wish to take this opportunity to applaud the work accomplished by the Rt Hon. Rebecca Kadaga during her tenure as CWP Chair.

In reviewing the work of the CWP since its establishment in 1989, I can see how the CWP has grown from strength to strength; I know that this has been as a result of the leadership of all the Chairpersons and the efforts of all CWP members in the Association.

There is established and growing evidence that women's leadership in political decision-making provides a huge contribution to the development agenda, and has a direct correlation at improving people's lives.

I wish you well in your discussions at your conference on this very important topic and leave you with the words of Malala Yosafzai, the Pakistani activist for female education and the youngest-ever Nobel Prize laureate who stated ***"We cannot succeed if half of us are held back"***.

In closing, I wish to take this opportunity to invite you to attend the Regional Hot Topic for the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Regions which is taking place here in London this Thursday afternoon. The CAA Regional Hot Topic Forum will focus of ***'Seeking to increase women's political participation'*** and I wish to thank the CPA Vice Chairperson and Speaker of the Montserrat Legislative Assembly, the Hon Shirley Osborne, as well as the CAA Regional Secretary and Clerk to the Jamaica Parliament, Mrs Heather Cooke for the direction and support they have provided towards delivery of this Forum.

I would like to thank those Branches that input into the topics for discussion today. The platform of the Commonwealth presents a unique opportunity: unrivalled in its make-up, the importance of our shared Commonwealth values and diverse minds is on the rise. In a time where diversity remains a challenge to many, the Commonwealth

capitalises on it by encouraging diverse nations to come together to find solutions to common challenges.

Thank you very much.

-ends-