OPENING PLENARY SESSION

Address by

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF
THE COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION,

DR. WILLIAM F. SHIJA,

AND

THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH,

HIS EXCELENCY KAMALESH SHARMA

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Prepared by
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Parliament of Sri Lanka
ADDRESS BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF
THE COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION,
DR. WILLIAM F. SHIJA

PRESENT:
The Hon. Chamal Rajapaksa, CPA President and Speaker of the Parliament of Sri Lanka
His Excellency Kamalesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General
Dr. William F. Shija, Secretary-General, Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

Mr. President: Honourable Officers of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Honourable Delegates, Ladies and Gentlemen. I have the honour to call to order the Opening Plenary Session of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference. I would like, once again, to welcome all Delegates, Secretaries, Official Branch Observers and other Observers to the Conference and hope you have a pleasant stay in Colombo.

The Session will begin with addresses by the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, Dr. William F. Shija followed by the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth, His Excellency Kamalesh Sharma. This will be followed by a question period when you will have an opportunity to ask questions from both Secretaries-General. I would ask the Delegates to be ready to ask your questions after both Secretaries-General have spoken. You will have to catch my eye in order to ask a question.

I now introduce the first speaker, Dr. William F. Shija.

Dr. William F. Shija: Thank you. The Hon. Chamal Rajapaksa, Member of Parliament, CPA President and Speaker of Parliament of Sri Lanka, the Hon. Mninwa Johannes Mahlangu, CPA Vice-President and Chairman of the National Council of Provinces of South Africa, Rt. Hon. Sir Alan Haselhurst, Member of Parliament, United Kingdom House of Commons and Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee, the Hon. (Dr.) Nafisa Shah, Member of Parliament, Pakistan National Assembly and CPA Vice-Chairperson, the Hon. Marwick Khumalo, Member of Parliament, Swaziland National Assembly and CPA Treasurer, the Hon. Alix Boyd-Knights, Member of the House of Assembly, Chairperson of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) and Speaker of the House of Assembly, Dominica, the Hon. (Dr.) Sudharshini Fernandopulle, Member of Parliament of Sri Lanka and CWP President, His Excellency Kamalesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General and Mrs. Sharma, Hon. Speakers and Presiding Officers, Distinguished Heads of Delegations, Members of the Diplomatic Corps, Distinguished Conference Delegates, Clerks and CPA Regional and Branch Secretaries, invited Guests, Observers, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen. Ayubowan! We got a lesson this morning from the Secretary-General of the Parliament of Sri Lanka to say "Ayubowan". You can simply say, Ayubowan!
Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates, I really feel very delighted that the 58th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference here in Colombo, Sri Lanka, gives me another privilege to address you this afternoon. I join the Chairperson of the Executive Committee, Rt. Hon. Sir Alan Haselhurst, Member of Parliament, United Kingdom, House of Commons and Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee, and you Distinguished Delegates, in the expression of immense appreciation and gratitude to the President of the Association, the Hon Chamal Rajapaksa, Member of Parliament and Speaker of the Parliament of Sri Lanka, the Parliament and the Government and people of Sri Lanka, for the wonderful reception, hospitality, and excellent arrangements that have been made for all the Delegates to this Conference. Mr. President, we say thank you very much for that - Bohoma Sthuthi.

I believe the Delegates will join me in having noted that Sri Lanka now appears to enjoy its peaceful atmosphere after years of conflict as we can see the indications of social and cultural vibrancy, particularly after the wonderful performance last night that many of us witnessed.

I am very delighted that the Commonwealth Secretary-General, His Excellency Kamlesh Sharma, is able to join us this year and I wholeheartedly welcome you, Your Excellency, and your Delegation. I am happy to note that as the Commonwealth Secretary-General you continue to support the community of Commonwealth Parliamentarians through a number of programme activities, including attending our Conference, in person, or by representation. Although you were unable to be with us for our Centennial Conference in London last year, I am glad that you were ably represented by your Deputy Secretary-General, Mrs. Mmasekgoa Masire-Mwamba. Thank you very much indeed for deputizing that important event we had.

Distinguished Delegates, this year’s Conference theme, “Ensuring a Relevant Commonwealth for the Future,” and the scheduled workshops further reflect on our century-old dynamic process to promote Parliamentary democracy in the Commonwealth and beyond. Simply defined, Parliamentary democracy is governance based on majority rule with minority care and share. When I addressed you last year in London, I recounted how the CPA at 100 had gone through the thick and thin of peaceful and conflict periods; moved on to eliminate discriminatory laws; strengthened voting systems; reformed the administration and funding of Parliaments; established new Parliamentary structures; and promoted Parliamentary international diplomacy. These activities, facilitated by numerous physical and remote communications, were realized through the various programmes we undertake every year.

Mr. President, many Delegates will recall that just over 10 years ago, the CPA established the system of periodic five-year Strategic Plans; the first being for 2002-2006 and the second being for the period 2007-2012. It is my expectation that the General Assembly will endorse the third Strategic Plan for the period 2013-2017, here in Colombo, on Friday, 14th September, having been approved and recommended by the Executive Committee. To improve the implementation of our next Strategic Plan, we will develop annual Business Plans with indicative and measurable objectives for implementation.

In addressing you today, I wish to emphasize that the delivery of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference is a highlight in our programme activities. It is part of the implementation of the current Strategic Plan for 2007-2012. The Conference theme of the 58th
Conference is meant to enable Delegates to reflect on the challenges raised by the report of Eminent Persons Group (EPG) which was formed by Commonwealth Heads of State and Government in Trinidad and Tobago in 2009 and reported in Perth last year on what could be done to strengthen the Commonwealth.

For this reason, I feel obliged to, once again, thank the CPA Sri Lanka Branch for hosting this Conference. The hosting of the Annual Conference is a major exercise and I believe Delegates will join me in commending again and again that Sri Lanka, apart from its past difficulties, was able to volunteer to host this Conference and that is why we are all here.

Of course, we still remember, Mr. President, the hospitality that you extended in 1974 when you first hosted this Conference and also in 1995 when you hosted this Conference for the second time. So, we can tell that it is now really in your tradition that you continue to come forward to showcase what is happening in your country under the democratic process.

On our part, this Conference is, therefore, a continuation of the programmes kit that we expend considerable resources each year to enable Members and Parliamentary staff to exchange and debate Parliamentary and other global issues. It is through events such as this Conference programme that Commonwealth Parliamentarians effectively participate in the examination of national, regional and international issues such as terrorism, human trafficking, international trade, climate change and others.

Mr. President, the CPA programme activities reflect the broad categories of our current Strategic Plan. That is, professional development for Members and staff; technical assistance for Branches; assistance to improve human rights; global, national and personal security as well as sustainable development. It is through these broad-based programme areas that we are able to support our Member Branches and respond to branch or regional requests based on the available resources every year. For example, for decades now, our professional development workshops for Members and staff have included the rotational annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Seminar, such as the one held in New Delhi, India, last year and the one held in Samoa this year as well as the Canadian Seminar held in Ottawa each year. We already know that there is invitation for individual Parliamentarians to go to Ottawa some time in October. We also have been convening several workshops on Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures, Post-Election Seminars for Branches and the Annual and Small Branches Conferences, such as the one which just ended today.

There have also been Government and Opposition workshops in Nigeria. For example, a major workshop was held for West Africa which included some non-Commonwealth countries, such as Liberia as well as the one that was held in Tanzania for East Africa, which also attracted Members who might be non-traditional Commonwealth attendance. We see that particularly in Africa, the Southern African Development Community area has Members who come from Portuguese-orientated countries, but they are now part of the Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures Workshops that have been done in Southern Africa and I had the privilege of launching those sometime last year. We also have Staff Development Workshops at regional level as well as Technical Assistance Programmes to support Branches such as Bougainville, the
Solomon Islands, Malawi, Swaziland and Guyana. All these activities significantly contribute to the strengthening of Parliaments and elevate the relevance of the Commonwealth.

In the area of gender, the CPA has continued to support the work of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians. Governance programmes to promote gender equality and equity in the work place have been held in cooperation with the Commonwealth Secretariat and other partners. For example, last year, the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians’ Pacific Region Gender and Democracy Seminar was held in New Zealand.

I am just taking a small portion to cover the Pacific. Also, the number of women elected as Members of Parliament and those who attend CPA events have, over the past 10 years, steadily increased. The CWP Chairperson regularly writes to CPA Branch Presidents encouraging them to include more women in their delegations to the Annual Conference because this is a very enriching Parliamentary experience that we also witness here in Colombo. I am happy to recall that we have worked very closely with the first CWP Chairperson, Hon. Lindiwe Maseko, Speaker of Gauteng, since the CWP started its work. We have also worked very well with the Hon. Kashmala, MP of Pakistan and we are working very well with the current CWP Chairperson, Hon. Alix Boyd-Knights, Speaker of Dominica.

Also, I am happy to note that a recent three-year CWP work programme has provided focus and impetus for the Association. A triennial CWP Conference in the final year of the term of the CWP Chairperson is organized at the Annual Conference and we expect this to happen next year in South Africa. In its General Assembly in Kenya in 2010, the CPA approved that the Chairperson of the CWP become one of the Officers of the Association. So, that constitutional change was quite significantly progressive in terms of elevating what is the relevance of Commonwealth when women are being taken in as inclusive participants in the activities of the Association and the Commonwealth at large. Mr. President, I believe that these steps, which promote the participation of women in public service through Parliaments, are highly relevant to the future of the Commonwealth.

In the area of global, national and personal security, our programme events have always focused on debates on human trafficking, the rights of women and children, migration, and other related issues. The CPA has had rich discussions and considerable experience to assist Parliaments and countries in post-conflict situations. This type of programme could benefit countries such as Sri Lanka and the CPA will examine the possibility of planning and implementing a relevant programme for Sri Lanka in the near future, particularly in cooperation with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Parliament of Sri Lanka itself.

Mr. President, with regard to Commonwealth promotion activities, I am happy to report that the CPA has an annual Commonwealth Day programme which brings together over 35 Commonwealth citizens aged between 18 and 26 at CPA Headquarters to introduce participants to the Commonwealth, the CPA, democracy and Parliamentary affairs, and includes a tour of the United Kingdom Parliament. This one-day programme is usually quite exciting. Commonwealth Day and Youth Parliament activities across branches are usually supported by the Secretariat through modest grants that we give to individual Parliaments.
Mr. President, the brief programme activities I have described are usually made possible because of four main factors: programme source, funding, host branch availability and partners. I therefore kindly request you, Hon. Delegates, to continue to identify those areas that your Parliaments and Legislatures can base a programme request since this is an important principle in a member-driven organization such as ours.

It is gratifying for me to note that, at present, our Association is financially healthy to enable an increase in the volume of programme activities through short and medium term proposed events as you may so wish.

The other factor that energizes our activities and programmes is our relationship with partners. Over the years, the Association has built close partnerships with almost all organizations that carry out Parliamentary work, either through research or issue-based events. The Commonwealth Secretariat and other Commonwealth organizations make up the main partners. That is why I talked about the Seminar on Government and Opposition. We believe that good partners enable us to add new methods of expanding the relevancy of the Commonwealth.

Mr. President, the CPA programme activities are facilities to strengthen the effectiveness of Parliamentarians and Parliamentary staff. Over the past decade, the CPA and partners have contributed much to Parliamentary reform and strengthening. For example, last year, the CPA and the World Bank Institute co-published a major book on Parliamentary Reform in Africa after several years of cooperation on the subject. Earlier in 2006, as I said, we introduced the Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures Workshops, a programme which continues to assist many developing Parliaments to modernize their Parliamentary procedures and practices. I am happy to report that the latest one is the workshop which was planned for the Canadian Parliamentarians in terms of Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures, which is very interesting indeed.

Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, let me end my remarks this evening by requesting every one of you to use the opportunity available at this Conference to further expand the fraternity and friendship through the CPA.

We need to continue to overcome our cultural and gender barriers for a better Commonwealth. Let us use the opportunities at this Conference in Sri Lanka and beyond, and future activities to strengthen equality and eliminate divisive elements that could weaken the relevance of the Commonwealth in the future. Also, the development partnerships that lead to the reduction of poverty should be maximized in the Commonwealth and, I think, this would be in the spirit of the Report of the EPG.

Mr. President, the CPA successes have always been made by all in the Family. I therefore wish to recognize the extensive contribution and the guidance of former and present Chairpersons and Members of the Executive Committee, as well as our Speakers and Presiding Officers. In the period under review and now, they have always provided guidance and encouragement through a clear policy direction based on democratic process. I respectfully and highly commend our speakers and Presiding Officers who make decisions for our Branches’ participation, in our activities such as this Conference in Sri Lanka and several others that we have witnessed.
I also wish to thank my colleagues, the Regional and Branch Secretaries for their most valuable, extensive and dedicated contribution and assistance in communicating the essential information that makes the lifeline of our Association.

And, last but not least, I sincerely thank my colleagues, all the staff of the CPA Headquarters Secretariat who constantly team up with me to keep the CPA machinery constantly moving. Can you please stand up my colleagues so that the Conference Delegates can see you properly? - [Applause.] Certainly, these colleagues are just some of the staff. One of our colleagues, Mr. David Broom, the Director of Finance and Administration, is not well and we have to leave him in London with a few staff. Colleagues, I wish to say that really your support is extraordinary in this type of responsibility. If you do not get sufficient assistance, you could run mad because e-mails could come up in terms of preparation of such a Conference in thousands before you have completed the preparation.

In a very special way, I also want to thank my friend Mr. Dhammika Dasanayake, the Regional Secretary for Asia and Secretary-General of the Sri Lanka Parliament for his exceptional assistance and cooperation as we prepared for this Conference. Mr. Dasanayake, please stand up for the Conference Delegates to see you. - [Applause.] Thank you very much, Mr. Dasanayake. You have always been on our right hand side even when we do other conferences in other countries.

Mr. President, Distinguished Delegates, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you all a happy and successful Conference and look forward to working with you to prepare for the 59th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Johannesburg, South Africa as we have been informed.

Having said that Mr. President and Distinguished Delegates, I still have another last assignment. I now call upon His Excellency Kamalesh Sharma, the Commonwealth Secretary-General to address the gathering. Mr. Sharma, a career diplomat from India has served in the international community in numerous capacities, including the United Nations in New York and was India’s High Commissioner to London. The first time I met him was when he was India’s High Commissioner to London and I remember, he worked under me very much. He is now serving his second four-year term as the Commonwealth Secretary-General and we expect that he is going to be working with us through these conferences and other programmes assisting us. He has been really the publisher of the Eminent Persons Group Report, which we received after the CHOGM in Perth, Australia, last year.

Ladies and Gentlemen, please join me in welcoming His Excellency Kamalesh Sharma to the Podium and incidentally he has only time with us until 4.45 p.m. because he has to leave for another urgent appointment.

Thank you very much for your kind attention and God bless you!
ADDRESS BY THE SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH,
HIS EXCELENCY KAMALESH SHARMA

His Excellency Kamalesh Sharma: Thank you very much indeed, William and thank you for comprising my CV. I am afraid I have reached the stage in life full that it sounds a bit like an obituary.

Distinguished Parliamentarians, eminent Guests, I thank the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, its Chair, Sir Alan Haselhurst, and its Secretary-General, Dr. William Shija, for kindly inviting me to be here with you. I also thank our host, the Speaker of Parliament of Sri Lanka, the Hon. Chamal Rajapaksa and congratulate him for the excellent arrangements made for this Conference and for the spectacular show last evening.

The CPA is a vital component in the global architecture of the Commonwealth and an indispensable partner working alongside the Secretariat in our shared mission of advancing Commonwealth values with democracy, development and respect for diversity foremost among them. Indeed, with the CPA having celebrated its 100th anniversary last year, and the modern Commonwealth itself now being well over 60 years old, we can truly claim to be travelling companions on a very long journey. Parliaments lie at the heart of democracy and are held in uniquely high esteem by the Commonwealth, and the CPA helps draw together all that is best from these organs of representative democracy across the Commonwealth family. The vast wealth and breadth of experience convened by the CPA never fails to impress; more than 16,000 members from 170 Parliaments in 52 Commonwealth countries, it is a truly phenomenal grouping.

The members represent national and provincial assemblies, unitary and federal states, vast states and tiny ones and the CPA enables them to connect, interact and deepen the understanding of their respective roles and responsibilities as representatives of the people.

An outstanding feature of the Commonwealth as a community is its capacity to convene and connect, bring in people and institutions together to share experience helping each other for mutual and collective benefit. This is the essence of the CPA and of the Commonwealth as a whole; it always has been and always will be. Her Majesty the Queen, of course, summed it up best when she called the Commonwealth, “The Original Worldwide Web”. It is this spirit, this benefit, which, I believe, is integral to what the Commonwealth can do and what it can continue to be in future.

I am also delighted to be in Sri Lanka, a country where civilization stretches back to ancient times, a vibrant Parliamentary democracy since Independence, a melting pot of ethnicities and culture, a country that is known for the warmth of its welcome and hospitality.

Sri Lanka holds a special place as one of only three emerging sovereign states, amongst the small total of eight, that in 1949 came together as signatories of the London Declaration marking the foundation of the modern Commonwealth. And, we are pleased that Sri Lanka will also host our next Heads of Government Meeting next year. Both this Conference and the Heads’ Summit in
2013 offer opportunities for Sri Lanka to make an important contribution to the Commonwealth and the world beyond. The country has seen many years of painful and traumatic civil conflict. Its overcoming the forces of terrorism is a major achievement. We believe Sri Lanka recognizes that having won the war, it is now important to build peace. We welcome the steps being taken to implement the recommendations of the Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission through a national Action Plan. I have had discussions with the Minister of External Affairs and others this week on how Sri Lanka is promoting post-conflict reconciliation and rehabilitation, and am grateful to be received by President Mahinda Rajapaksa tomorrow. I also hope to see for myself some of the important work the Commonwealth has been requested to do in partnership with Sri Lanka to promote youth entrepreneurship in conflict-affected areas. Sri Lanka knows that the Commonwealth is a willing and able partner, with a wealth of experience to share wherever this might be welcome. Hosting the Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference as well as next year’s CHOGM is a signal honour and trust for Sri Lanka.

Parliaments and Parliamentarians embody the culture of democracy in a country. Legitimacy is derived from the freely-expressed will of the people through national Parliaments, State Assemblies and Local Councils that, in turn, serve the people by holding the Executive to account and by ensuring democracy delivers for all. We often speak of the globalizing world in which we live. This heightens our awareness that while the standard of living for many is being raised, too many are still being left behind. The global context within which the Commonwealth strives for the advancement of all remains one in which the gap between the rich and the poor is enormous and, in too many instances, continues to grow. "Democracy" and "Development" were often referred to as the twin pillars of our work at the Commonwealth Secretariat, each inseparably combining with the other as we seek to deliver the benefits of both for the common good. To these, we now add "Diversity", also a hallmark feature and Commonwealth value - equality for all in our populations.

This symmetry is important. For stable and sustainable progress to be achieved, it is necessary for democracy and development, and respect for diversity to be advanced together, never pressing ahead with one to the detriment of the others. They reinforce each other, sustain each other, and each person needs them all. All Commonwealth Parliaments, and all members of our family of Commonwealth organizations, must continue to strive, in particular, to build positively on the richness and potential of our diversity, and avoid our differences becoming a source of sterility, let alone division. That is the Commonwealth way, and it is a way of working that can be challenging but must be nurtured at all times. Our responsibility as leaders and representatives is to model strength and harmony in diversity to our own members and to the wider world.

We have now worked with the CPA for many years on a series of "Government and Opposition Workshops". These aim to foster a more constructive relationship between governing and opposition parties, one which is conducive to working together within a democratic framework that places harmony, the communal good and inclusive development above partisan considerations, vital though party loyalties and policies are if there is to be a genuine democratic choice for the electorate and a robust public debate. Our most recent workshop in this series brought together representatives of governing and opposition parties in East Africa. This builds upon similar events in Asia, West Africa, the Pacific, Southern Africa and the Caribbean.
Parliament should be the primary forum where the voice of the people, especially the poor and marginalized, is heard with absolute clarity. Confidence amongst the people that Parliament truly understands and is able to address the needs and interests of the people is a paramount guarantee of social peace and stability. Such confidence can only really be secured if Parliamentarians of both the majority and minority parties can show their effectiveness in leading free and unfettered public debate, in representing the interests and concerns of their constituents, in holding the government to account and in scrutinizing, improving, and enacting legislation. This is the supreme Commonwealth value - Parliament is where the heart of democracy beats. These CPA Conferences therefore remain as important as ever, particularly as we see a growing sense of impatience and heightened ambition among young people for the opportunity of making a contribution to shaping the world in which they will live, learn, work and care for their families.

In a Commonwealth that now encompasses 54 countries, two billion people and a multitude of faiths, races, cultures and traditions, it is remarkable and a tribute to our methods of working together on a basis of trust and consensus, that we have found common ground on core values and principles and continue to cooperate on collective practical action across such a broad range of issues.

Your Conference Theme is “Ensuring a Relevant Commonwealth for the Future”. This is a topic on which we should constantly reflect, and indeed over recent months and years it has been assessed and commented on by a whole range of stakeholders, from citizens at the grass roots level to an Eminent Persons Group to Heads of Government. It is not that the Commonwealth is irrelevant, but wide consideration of this topic including by this Conference, is right and proper because the challenges facing us in the world today are as immense as they are broad, and are attended equally by opportunities. It is by evolving, refining and strengthening the focus of our engagement that we can hope to succeed in finding solutions and serving our member states.

In the 2009 "Affirmation of Commonwealth Values and Principles" adopted by our Heads of Government, they reiterated their commitment to democracy as a core value and they reaffirmed their commitment, I quote :

“…to the inalienable right of the individual to participate by means of free and democratic political processes in shaping the society in which they live”.

The promotion of democratic values, alongside development and diversity, thus remains a principal focus of the Commonwealth. It is our ‘USP’, our brand strength, a fount of our continued relevance.

The Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group acts as the custodian of the Commonwealth’s fundamental core political values and, since its establishment in 1995, it has been addressing situations where serious or persistent violations of those values have occurred.

As such, CMAG has supported the strengthening of democracy in member countries and its role has been globally noted. In 2009, Commonwealth leaders decided and they wanted to raise the bar further - a testament to how seriously we take the promotion and upholding of democracy within our family. Leaders not only sought to raise the bar of their political will and commitment, but to back it up with practical action through strengthening CMAG.
CMAG itself took on this responsibility and produced a report to Heads for their 2011 meeting in Perth. In the report, CMAG set out a series of proposals for how it could more effectively and practically operate as the custodian of Commonwealth political values. This was endorsed by Heads as one of the seminal achievements of the Perth summit. The array of priority concerns identified by them expanded beyond a focus largely on the overthrow of a constitutional democratic government, to now include such concerns as the undermining of the independence of the judiciary; the postponement of national elections without constitutional or reasonable justification; a national electoral process that is seriously flawed; the systematic denial of political space such as through the detention of political leaders or restriction on freedom of association and assembly; the suspension of the lawful functioning of Parliament or other key democratic institutions; significant restrictions on the media or civil society; and, the systematic violation of populations of communities.

The Heads also encouraged CMAG to engage more proactively and positively in partnership with member states. We, therefore, now have a CMAG able to respond more effectively to serious or persistent violations. And already, in these first months since receiving that enhanced mandate, it is showing innovative ways of working.

It is a strong advantage of the Commonwealth to be able to forge partnerships between member countries, which may be from diverse parts of the globe but which often, by virtue of the shared experiences, have a great deal in common when it comes to institutional arrangements and legal frameworks.

Nowhere is this more valid in our work than in our support for elections. We are placing an increased focus on supporting electoral processes and institutions. Democracy is of course far more than just holding of elections, and we still place a great emphasis on our Latimer House Principles concerning the separation of powers, and supporting all democratic institutions.

We continue to observe elections and believe this makes a valuable contribution to the strengthening of the electoral process. At all times, we have important elections where the Commonwealth is likely to be called to serve. We also work closely with countries in strengthening electoral processes between elections. Elections are a key focus, as they blight nation-building and demoralize citizens when they go wrong.

The quality of a country’s election is, to a large extent, dependent upon the quality and the independence of its election management body, and the independence and support given to it. They make the pivotal difference. Our aim is to ensure that Commonwealth election commissions are a force for stability and confidence to the citizens, and uphold the highest standards of electoral efficiency, integrity and credibility.

With this in mind, we have established a Commonwealth Electoral Network, bringing together election management bodies as a mutually supportive peer group. The Network has been endorsed by Heads of Government and will be a key tool through which we support democracy in the Commonwealth. Our ambition is that it will create the ‘gold standard’ globally - not only in the Commonwealth - of elections in democratic service to the people.
I had the pleasure to attend the second biennial conference of the Network, which was held in Canada in June this year after its launch in Ghana in 2010. We had 60 senior election officials representing 43 election management bodies. Their commitment and camaraderie were inspiring. The Network now has a secure online digital workspace, where members can connect between peers and collaborate in real time to access information, share experiences, ask questions, and help promote best practices across the Commonwealth in all areas of election management. The Network’s workspace is part of ‘Commonwealth Connects’, the innovative and contemporary cloud-based pan-Commonwealth digital platform for interaction, transaction and dynamic sharing of knowledge across the Commonwealth by member states and communities of practice.

As ‘Commonwealth Connects’ expands and new functions are added it will be an essential tool in assisting in the broader process of Commonwealth reform and renewal by providing an effective technology tool for demonstrating the Commonwealth and its values. It will also increase public visibility and outreach, enable coherence and co-operation among Commonwealth agencies, and generate partnerships and collaboration. Let us take our partnership to a new level, as indeed that between all parliaments of the Commonwealth.

During my tours of member states, I invariably seek meetings with Speakers and Leaders of the Opposition of the country’s legislature. The role of the CPA also invariably comes up for discussion. In the reform and renewal process now underway, I have made closer partnership with the Commonwealth family integral to the way we advance in the Scoping Paper for the new four year Strategic Plan of the Secretariat, which I shared with member government immediately before coming to Colombo for this conference. The Paper and way the Secretariat works will be considered by Commonwealth Foreign Ministers at their meeting later this month in New York and thereafter the new Strategic Plan will be fleshed out in detail for adoption by the end of this year.

The theme of relevance was also very much at the heart of the deliberations of the Commonwealth Eminent Persons Group - or EPG - which Heads of Government entrusted me in 2009 to convene to examine options for reform. The EPG submitted its report last year offering 106 recommendations on sharpening the impact, strengthening the networks and raising the profile of the Commonwealth. Most of those have either already been adopted or remitted for further consideration. Refining and reshaping the work of the Commonwealth for greater impact is a continuing process. We move forward together adjusting our focus to the new opportunities that arise for collective engagement and practical action according to changing contemporary priorities. This flexibility and responsiveness is what gives the Commonwealth its enduring relevance.

Distinguished Parliamentarians, eminent Guests, "Ensuring a Relevant Commonwealth for the Future" is our shared task and common aim. Your fingers are on the pulse of people at every level in your respective countries; your position gives you a unique insight into their pressing concerns and their aspirations. It is by speaking to these, and by providing promising and practical ways forward that we reinforce a sense of Commonwealth value, identity and belonging.
I feel sure that the commitment you demonstrate through your presence and participation here bodes well for the level of engagement and the ideas that will flow from this conference. It is this collective dynamic involvement that brings energy and vitality to the Commonwealth.

I thank you once again and I wish this conference well in advancing the values of the Commonwealth and, most importantly, the aspirations of the people you represent. Thank you.

Hon. Delegates, I am sorry to interrupt you but I have to say that I have an urgent engagement which I must absolutely honour. Usually, I look forward to Q & As because that educates me; I learn a lot and it gives the Secretary-General yet another opportunity to make his points. But, I am afraid I have to forego that pleasure on this occasion and seek your indulgence for that.

The Chairman: Thank you very much, your Excellency. Delegates, as I told you, now you have time to ask questions.

A Delegate: I want to know how much time is available to ask questions in order that we can exchange our views as much as possible.

Dr. William F. Shija: May I respond to the distinguished delegate who inquired about the time available, in case they want to exchange their view points as much as possible. The time allotted is until 17 hours. Now it is a little less than 15 minutes to 17:00 hours Maybe, we could use the next 10 minutes or so for questions and answers and then the President will close the Session.

The Chairman: Delegates, please state your name before asking questions.

Hon. Lulama Smuts Ngonyama: A very informative address was made by the Secretary-General with regard to the number of activities that are being executed by the Association. It is of great value to most of us. I would like to state that some of the Resolutions and Protocols that were brought in through workshops and seminars, as the Secretary-General has referred to, can definitely go a long way in assisting us.

Dr. William F. Shija: Mr. President, if I may respond to that, the Hon. Delegate is absolutely correct. Usually, the best of the service that we, as the Secretariat, could render to our members and Parliamentary staff is that we should be able to give them information about the activities that are carried out when the branches make reference. Certainly, every year we produce a small booklet, which is called “Programme Activities Booklet”. We have not done one for this year because we are yet to reach the months of November and December. But, for 2010 and 2011 we produced such pamphlets. That is the one we send to our branch secretaries for their reference. The programmes that we have been able to implement across the branches of the Association would be mentioned in that. Secondly, information would actually be available on our website and our website should be utilized as much as possible. I agree that our website has had problems of reconstruction during the last couple of years. But, now we have made some significant progress and have been able to load as much information as possible. We continue to work on it; technicalities are there. But, as soon as we get information useful for our branches, we will load them on our website so that that information can be utilized. Therefore,
members and branches are always invited to log on to our website to see what information is available. I definitely appreciate the emphasis that we need to share information with our members and staff.

**The Chairman:** Yes, Hon. Delegate you can ask your question.

**Hon. Henry Chimunthu Banda:** Mr. President, I am the Speaker of Malawi Parliament. I thought I should make a request through you to the Commonwealth Secretary-General who has just left. Would it be possible for the Secretary-General, through you, to circulate the paper of the presentation that he made? I would also like to ask the Secretary-General of the CPA to circulate his paper also either by way of e-mail or as hardcopies. Thank you.

**Dr. William F. Shija:** Mr. President, if I may respond to that question, certainly we will make effort to request the Commonwealth Secretary-General to give us a copy and I believe he will be able to post it on the website of the Commonwealth Secretariat. If hard copies are available, we are going to distribute it. You asked about my speech. Yes, we will see to what extent we can produce some papers. These days we have reduced paper work. So, we try as much as possible to keep information electronically. We are going to smoothen up. Some of the words are star-marked. I will remove those star-marked words and then post them on the website. I thank you very much for that registration.

**A Delegate:** I would like to refer to the paper before me. First of all, let me thank our Secretary-General, Dr. William F. Shija for his inspiring, lively as well as eloquent speech and for his visionary leadership. I also thank you, for keeping the organization financially healthy. I would also like to commend the close partnership that you maintain with other organizations. There are some private organizations that are involved in running educational institutions in countries due to adversities of the economic crunch in some parts of the globe, precisely where I come from. Taking into consideration the partnerships that we have, can you look into the possibility of requesting for some assistance for us from organizations that I have already referred to?

**Dr. William F. Shija:** If I may respond to that, usually the process of partnership has to be taken quite carefully. We know that there are several organizations out there that have started working or at least they have had enough time of working on Parliamentary work. We used to have a monopoly of the CPA. But, in the recent decade or so we have seen that the World Bank institute has been increasing its interest in parliamentary activities and we cooperate with them because we have been able to bring them to the standard of the history that we have built. But, if an organization appears either through correspondence or by physical contact that they are also interested in carrying out parliamentary work, we usually would wish to check and counter check what are the credentials they have before we actually form an alliance or any type of partnership with them. So, we are careful and if I get such a request, first of all, I, as the Secretary-General, would get exhaustive information from such an organization and then report to the Executive Committee and they would take a decision as to how we would regularize such a relationship or partnership and then move forward. Therefore, through this process, the Executive Committee is also informed and we can get sufficient credentials of such an organization; we have been able to
sign some memoranda of understanding between us and such organizations. So, in many cases we would not be quickly responding until we are absolutely sure of their credibility.

The Chairman: Gentlemen, since the time is 17.00 hours, we now have to conclude. Before that I invite the Secretary-General of Parliament, Sri Lanka, to make an announcement.

Mr. Dhammika Dasanayake: With your permission, may I be allowed to make an announcement? We have been requested by many delegations to explore the possibility of arranging a trip to the Northern Province. So, I am happy to inform you that this is possible. If any delegate or delegation wishes to visit the Northern Province, they could inform the information desk of the respective hotels, so that we can make the flight arrangements and take care of you. Please do not hesitate to inform the information desk if you wish to visit the Northern Province. This will take place on the 13th of September, that is the day on which we have planned the excursions.

The Chairman: Delegates I look forward to a productive meeting and adjourn the session. Thank you.

(The Session Adjourned)