Parliaments and Democracy in an Evolving Commonwealth

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association’s Chairperson, Emilia Monjowa Lifaka, describes the important work of the organisation in supporting different parliaments and legislatures across the Commonwealth to develop fundamental democratic values and practices for the benefit of all.

Tracing the evolution of democracy reveals the differing stages of its development in each Commonwealth country. While some countries have a history of nascent democracy, others cherish long-established democratic parliamentary governments with diverse challenges. New democratic governments face the challenge of strengthening and institutionalising democracy, and for older democracies, the question is how to deepen their roots.

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) has been a forum for parliamentarians to articulate and discuss developments on parliamentary procedures and practices, democracy, good governance and human rights for over a century. These are a fundamental part of the Commonwealth’s values, as agreed by Commonwealth Heads of Government and codified in the 2012 Commonwealth Charter and other Commonwealth declarations such as the Harare Declaration of 1991 and the Singapore Declaration of 1971. The Commonwealth Charter demonstrates resolve and collective commitment to promoting and ensuring that these Commonwealth democratic principles and values are upheld, nurtured and implemented to the highest standards.

The CPA continues to play an important role in this regard. Over the years, the CPA has been a medium for sharing best practices and principles on these fundamental values, which are important for the promotion of democracy and development for the benefit of all Commonwealth citizens. It has a membership of over 180 Commonwealth parliaments and legislatures, big and small, across all regions of the Commonwealth, and holds a unique position in representing national, state, provincial and territorial legislatures in all 54 member countries.

The breadth of the CPA’s membership reminds us of the long record of cooperation and collegiality among the parliaments and legislatures of the Commonwealth. Valuable bilateral exchanges and international meetings of those elected or appointed to represent our citizens, and of officials who serve parlaments and legislative assemblies, provide important demonstrations of our shared values and democratic principles.

The CPA acknowledges that democracy is a continuously developing concept that needs to be nurtured, and that no single parliament can do it all in terms of providing a source of best practice. All parliaments, regardless of how big or small, young or old, are good sources of vital transformation and influence.

The CPA is therefore a key forum for promoting parliamentary development and experience, where members learn and share from each other. The CPA’s many activities and its parliamentary journal, The Parliamentary, are vital not only for sharing information among parliamentarians and other stakeholders, but are also instrumental in enabling the CPA to fulfill its statement of purpose to ‘connect, develop, promote and support parliamentarians and their staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the enduring values of the Commonwealth’. Members exchange views and deepen their understanding of contemporary democratic and development issues, as well as their roles and responsibilities as the people’s representatives.

Highlights of recent programmatic activities include assisting CPA Branches to conduct self-assessments, using our Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures under the Commonwealth Partnership for Democracy (CPFD) project, which was funded by the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office as a legacy of the last Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in 2018. Since then, the project has been very well received by parliaments within the Commonwealth community, which have acknowledged the importance of the CPA Benchmarks and the benefits of undertaking self-assessments using these recommended markers.

They noted that the exercise not only promotes good governance and management of parliaments, but also increases legislatures’ self-awareness of institutional gaps and challenges that need further attention.

The CPA Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures reinforce the belief that effective parliaments are one of the principal institutions of any functioning democracy. They provide a minimum standard and a guide on how a parliament should be constituted and how it should function in line with the values and principles of the Commonwealth Charter on the development of free and democratic societies.

The continuous professional development of parliamentarians and parliamentary staff remains a key priority of the CPA and we therefore continue to develop innovative and relevant programmes for our members and parliamentary staff. These programmes facilitate the expansion of knowledge, enhancement of procedures and practices, and improvements in accountability and transparency, so that our democratic institutions answer to the needs and expectations of their electorates.

These activities align closely with the Commonwealth priorities for continually raising levels of performance and responsiveness. Parliamentarians have a vital role in enabling democracy to filter down to a local level among those they represent, as they also hold the key to account ministers and officials at the highest levels of government. The most senior interaction between parliamentarians that takes place within the Commonwealth is at the biennial CHOGM. At successive CHOGMs, heads of government have lifted Commonwealth ambitions for its people and maintained its global relevance through the contributions of governments and parliaments alongside other intergovernmental and associated organisations, networks of civil society organisations, businesses and other partners.

Under the CHOGM 2020 theme: ‘Delivering a Common Future: Connecting, Innovating, Transforming’, Commonwealth leaders will consider a wide range of issues including trade and investment; inclusive growth; creating higher levels of employment, particularly for young people; climate change and the environment, including the Commonwealth Blue Charter; providing affordable healthcare and quality education; protecting the marginalised and under-represented citizens, including gender equality. There are a huge number of issues that the Commonwealth must work together on and this demonstrates the important role that Commonwealth parliaments and parliamentarians can play in driving forward progress, and in setting ambitious goals for attainment nationally, regionally and for the Commonwealth collectively.

Looking to the future, democracy in the Commonwealth must take account of changing economic situations and the impact of global pandemics, coupled with emerging trade and economic patterns deepening interdependence, peace and security issues, as well as the prospects of creating greater economic opportunities for human development and social inclusion, as these will have significant implications in defining the common aspirations of the people of the Commonwealth. It will be necessary for democracy to maintain a process of evaluating and evolving norms and practices that will allow for continuous adjustment to unfolding and ever-changing political, socio-economic and cultural trends.