It gives me great pleasure in my role as the Secretary-General of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) to join in partnership with the Commonwealth Secretariat and the Universal Rights Group in the launch of this excellent publication: The Global Human Rights Implementation Agenda: the role of National Parliaments.
This publication which recognises the longstanding collaboration of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association and the Commonwealth Secretariat in the important area of building the capacity of national parliaments in the implementation of human rights is extremely timely as next month – the 10th December – marks the 70th Anniversary of the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 (‘the UDHR’).

It is therefore very appropriate for us to take a moment to reflect on this significant milestone in the context of the role of our national parliaments as the natural ‘guardians’ of the universal human rights of Commonwealth citizens.

First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, who was the United States delegate to the United Nations in 1946 is famously quoted to have described the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) ‘as a Magna Carta’ for all mankind.

She also said to the UN General Assembly that her government considered the UDHR document to be a ‘good document even a great document and this is why the United States intends to give it our full support’.

Fast forward some 70 years and the careful consensus reached in the UDHR on the importance of respecting the inalienable rights of all human beings seems to be under significant stress, with fractures amongst global players, including between the five permanent members of the Security Council, all of whom participated with other nations as the founding fathers of the UDHR.

The seriousness of the situation was exemplified this year by the early departure of His Excellency Ambassador Zeid Ra’ad Al Hussein, from the key position of United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights who unusually chose not to stand for a second term of office. In giving his reasons, he said, “After reflection, I have decided not to seek a second four-year term. To do so, in the current geopolitical context, might involve bending a knee in supplication; muting a statement of advocacy; lessening the independence and integrity of my voice — which is your voice.”
In a global era that appears increasingly reluctant to uphold human rights, we in the Commonwealth must redouble our individual and collective efforts to renew our commitment to ensuring respect for human rights for all citizens, especially the marginalized and vulnerable who are often the first casualties in any erosion of human rights protections.

The ambition set out in the preamble of the UDHR must be our shared guiding light, namely, the UDHR representing ‘a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction.’

**Distinguished Guests**

At the CPA, we believe that the promotion and protection of human rights is no longer the sole preserve of governments or the Executive.

Rather, it is very much the role of Parliamentarians and of Parliaments to step up as the key enablers of human rights and to act as a check and balance on the policies of the Executive. The important role of Parliament sitting as it does at the centre of a nation’s domestic and international affairs should not be overlooked or under-estimated.

Over the past 70 years of the UDHR, the national and international role of parliamentarians and parliaments has grown significantly, not only in the breadth and depth of topics that routinely form the legislative programme of a 21st century Parliament, but also with an increasing focus on international human rights issues.

Current examples include the role of Parliaments across the Commonwealth in the implementation of the 2015 UN Sustainable Development Goals and in the UK the gradual erosion of the use of the royal prerogative as an Executive blanket power regarding decisions on the use of force.
Increasingly, these latter decisions on the use of force abroad, except in the most urgent of circumstances, are being taken by parliament resulting in a modification of traditional conventions and the narrowing in scope of the prerogative powers in the field of international law and human rights.

The upturn in the overall work of parliaments in their scrutiny of human rights matters is in my view to be welcomed. But it also represents the complexity of and increasing inter-connectedness between national and international issues and the importance of parliamentary accountability through the scrutiny and monitoring of executive action.

As law-makers, Parliaments help design the national legal framework that enables human rights to be promoted and protected at national levels and promote adherence of human rights at the international level through ratification of international instruments and the monitoring of treaty bodies.

As the report being launched today notes, “in contrast to the government, judiciary and civil society groups, parliaments are the place where government policies are or should be debated and scrutinized. By virtue of their constitutional mandate to represent the people, parliaments are vested with the necessary powers to fulfil their fundamental role as a ‘Guardian of human rights’”.

**Distinguished Guests**

In this way, Parliaments are the cornerstones of the national protection systems and play a crucial role in ensuring a State’s compliance with their international human rights obligations and, critically, share a responsibility with other branches of State to protect, respect and fulfill human rights.

It is therefore right that Parliaments should actively participate and have oversight of a country’s national report as part of the Universal Periodic Reporting Cycle or any other regional reporting mechanism. This function should not remain the sole preserve of the Executive. Parliaments have a vital role to play in not only translating international obligations into national policies and laws but also in monitoring their implementation.
Given that human rights constitute a cross cutting issue that should be considered by all Parliamentary committees, the CPA believes that in order to put human rights at the Centre of their work, many parliaments need to further develop the necessary institutional structures, processes and mechanisms and establish parliamentary committees as oversight bodies with exclusive human rights mandates.

In this regard, several Commonwealth countries have already started doing so but numbers remain stubbornly low with the report citing only 28% of Commonwealth parliaments having established specialized parliamentary committees.

These Oversight bodies are a valuable tool in the implementation tool kit. Once established they should focus first and foremost on national human rights issues in their own jurisdictions and should be composed in a representative manner to include women, men, ethnic, religious and other minority groups. Diversity and inclusion is essential for proper oversight.

In summary, the overarching oversight functions of Parliaments give Parliamentarians a central role to identify and address possible violations of human rights and ensure that sufficient funding is allocated to allow for the effective implementation of human rights norms and standards.

In concluding, it is my view that even though the human rights climate may appear bleak, the opportunities for parliaments and parliamentarians to step up and realize the ideals of the UDHR for their citizens through the adoption of national progressive measures has never been greater.

In this context, the UN Secretary General has stated (GA Report A/72/351) that each UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) is closely intertwined with human rights. In effect each of them seeks to realize human rights for all by leaving no one behind. In that regard, a human rights-based approach to the goals helps to ensure a non-selective and impartial process based on participation, inclusiveness and transparent governance. This leads to better synergies among the three core pillars of the United Nations; human rights, development and
peace and security. It is therefore an opportunity to capitalize on the SDGs as universally accepted commitments and a valuable road map to guide development efforts in line with international human rights standards and norms.

The opportunity exists for Parliaments and Parliamentarians to play a greater role in promoting adherence to human rights norms and standards, including integrating the SDGs within a national human rights plan. Such action offers huge transformative potential to nations and their citizens, even against a bleak international backdrop regarding respect for human rights.

As the First lady, Eleanor Roosevelt wisely once said ‘It isn’t enough to talk about peace. One must believe in it. And it isn’t enough to believe in it. One must work at it’. The same sentiment must apply to our collective ambition to fully realize the global human rights implementation agenda for all peoples.

Respect for human rights must be a constant but to ensure this we must never become complacent. Thank you.

ENDS