FORMING STRONG BONDS THROUGH THE COMMONWEALTH MENTORING PROGRAMME

The next issue of *The Parliamentarian* will focus on the many achievements of this year’s Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Johannesburg. The delay to the publication of this issue is due to staff changes at the Secretariat. This summer, *The Parliamentarian*’s long-serving Editor Andrew Imlach left the CPA Secretariat. We are indebted to Andrew for making *The Parliamentarian* the leading publication it is today and I’m sure colleagues will join me in wishing Andrew the very best for the future.

Although this is not the time to describe the many highlights of the Annual Conference, I wanted to take this opportunity to thank the Chairperson Hon. Mninwa Johannes Mahlangu, MP, for his support and advice over the last year as President of the CPA. I am grateful to him for his commitment to the CPA and to delivering such a successful conference in Johannesburg.

One of the highlights of CPC 2013 was the launch of the Parliamentarians Mentoring Programme. The Commonwealth is uniquely positioned to offer its citizens the opportunity to easily share experiences and advice across six continents. Common language and similar values allow strong bonds to form quickly between individuals, even if their home countries happen to be geographically distant. This is particularly true when Parliamentarians meet other Parliamentarians. Since my election as CPA Chairperson, I have enjoyed numerous conversations with colleagues from a huge number of Legislatures to find we share similar challenges and opportunities in our constituencies and roles in Parliament. Parliamentarians representing Small Island States can learn much from those representing islands on the other side of the world; those representing rural constituencies share similar concerns to those in other countries, often in spite of varying topography or climate.

For some time, I have championed the idea of a more formal mechanism for Commonwealth Parliamentarians to maintain their personal links with one another. Many colleagues already enjoy close relationships with those they have met through CPA conferences, seminars or from participation in events held by their Branch. These personal relationships can often have a more practical benefit than anything a theoretical course can offer. Furthermore, politics is often a second career for many Parliamentarians. Colleagues with practical experience in business, education, law or charitable work may not focus on this area in their political career, but their knowledge could be invaluable to a colleague from a different Legislature. One of the focuses of the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians network has been to encourage participation of women in politics; this Mentoring Programme would offer newly elected women Parliamentarians the chance to be mentored by those with more experience, or to share their experience with another newly elected woman MP from a different country.

The Mentoring Programme is designed to be responsive to the needs of those enrolled; a match must suit both participants and offer benefits to both parties. Depending on the individual’s requirements, it could offer the opportunity to be matched with a parliamentarian from a similar constituency, or from a country or region of particular interest. The Programme should be a chance for less experienced Parliamentarians to be mentored by those with more experience; to seek advice from colleagues on a particular subject; or for tips and practical advice on communication, diplomacy, strategic thinking or leadership skills and to share information in a two way discussion.

To truly understand the issues and concerns of a parliamentary colleague, spending time in their constituency is often the only way to appreciate the complexity of a particular situation. The CPA recognizes that some Legislatures may not be able to offer funding for colleagues to engage with this aspect of the Programme.

To this end, the CPA Executive Committee has agreed that a small travel fund will be made available for those involved in the Mentoring Programme to facilitate reciprocal visits. Applications for funding should be made directly to the CPA Secretariat and will be evaluated on a case by case basis.

The Mentoring Programme is an integral part of the CPA’s commitment to
deepening democratic governance in the Commonwealth. In strengthening individual relationships between Parliamentarians through sharing experience, best practice and advice, the CPA will offer an invaluable service to its Members through the Mentoring Programme.

I am sure colleagues will enthusiastically sign up to the scheme, whether they are experienced politicians or newcomers to the political world. We share a common purpose and ambition; to serve our nation’s citizens to the best of our abilities. To realize this ambition we should unite together to pool our knowledge and expertise to benefit one another, and in turn our nation’s citizens. The CPA brings together many experienced and talented individuals and we should exploit this to everyone’s full advantage, making the most of this unique association of knowledge. More information on the mentoring programme will soon be available on the CPA Secretariat website. Alternatively, you can contact the CPA Secretariat directly at: hqsec@cpahq.org.

The Chairperson of the CPA (right), speaking at the media briefing during the 59th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference in Johannesburg, seated next to the President of the CWP, Ms Thapelo Dorothy Chiloane, MP.