The importance of Codes of Conduct in building public trust in Parliament

Conduct matters because it helps achieve the best possible government in the interests of the people. Democracies are complex systems founded in the relationships between people, Parliament and other institutions. Democracy works best when those relationships are trusting relationships. That is, relationships in which the people trust the Parliament to be acting in their best interests.

If people feel that the Parliament is addressing their concerns, they are more likely to support the parliamentary system, giving it credibility and legitimacy. Where there is such trust, there is a freer exchange of views, beliefs and ideas, more creative policy making and more innovative solutions to problems facing any community.

Background to the workshop

The CPA is committed to supporting Parliamentarians and parliamentary staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and the implementation of the good values of the Commonwealth including enhancing public trust in parliament and its members; a fundamental aspect of good governance and an open society.

In 2004, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) issued Recommendations for Transparent Governance and them in 2006, Recommended Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures. Since these recommendations were made, many other parliamentary associations have adopted their own sets of benchmarks, drawing heavily on the CPA Benchmarks.

To evaluate and to explore opportunities to refine the CPA Benchmarks to reflect developments since 2006, the CPA convened a Study Group in 2013, in partnership with the National Democratic Institute (NDI), bringing together Parliamentarians and representatives of the Commonwealth PMO community. As part of the agreed newly refined benchmarks, the group included information on Benchmarks for democratic and parliamentary behaviour. The Study Group recommended that the CPA Secretariat work with its Members and partners to develop a body of work on Democratic Parliamentary Behaviour.

During the 60th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference a workshop was held on ‘Parliamentarians and public trust: do codes of conduct help?’. One of the agreed recommendations from the workshop was to prepare a set of benchmarks to guide Parliaments in the development of codes of conduct. Also at the 60th CPC, a series of interviews were conducted on behalf of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association by Associate Professor Hon Dr Ken Coghill of Monash University and Dr Abel Kinyondo of the University of Dar Es Salaam in relation to parliamentary codes of conduct applying to members of parliament across the Commonwealth. The interviews
and research into parliamentary codes have contributed to a set of draft proposals for recommended benchmarks for Codes of Conduct for Members of Parliament.

**Objective of the workshop in April**

- Identify good practice in Codes of Conduct and their implementation across Commonwealth Parliaments;
- Consider draft recommendations for the establishment of an agreed set of benchmarks for codes of conduct;
- Examine methods of increasing accountability, transparency and public trust through the use of benchmarks for codes of conduct; and
- Discuss possible ethical competency activities that could be provided by CPA to its membership.

**Outcomes of the workshop**

The outputs of the workshop will be that participating members will have a better understanding of the issues surrounding the importance of an effective parliamentary code of conduct and to agree on a set of benchmarks for such codes. This document will be shared with all Branches of the CPA.

**Your input**

Your nominated member’s input and comments into the draft Benchmarks for Codes of Conduct are invaluable. As Members and Clerks, this workshop invites you to share the basis of your idea of commonly accepted standards that might already be enshrined in a code and it will offer the opportunity to discuss the establishment of new ones. The workshop itself will provide a forum for developing political agreement and ownership around the purpose and practical implementation of a robust code of conduct.

The idea is that the group gathered for the workshop would consider these draft benchmarks for Codes of Conduct to agree on Recommended Benchmarks for wider dissemination across the Commonwealth and beyond.