Address by
The Honourable Kelvin Charles
Chief Secretary
Tobago House of Assembly

Opening Ceremony of the 18th Biennial Conference of
Presiding Officers and Clerks
Of the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Region
Of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
The Magdalena Grand Beach Resort
August 14, 2017
SALUTATIONS

- The Honourable Bridgid Annisette-George, MP – Speaker of the House of Representatives of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago
- Hon. Camille Robinson Regis, Minister of Planning
- Vice-President of the Senate, Senator Nigel De Freitas and Mrs. De Freitas
- Other Parliamentarians and Members of the Executive Committee of the Trinidad and Tobago Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
- Visiting Speakers and Presidents of Legislatures
- Dr Denise Tsoiafatt-Angus, Presiding Officer of the Tobago House of Assembly
- Fellow members of the Tobago House of Assembly
- Mr. Raye Sandy, Chief Administrator and other Administrators of the Tobago House of Assembly
Good morning,

It is my pleasure as Chief Secretary of the Tobago House of Assembly to welcome all of you to the beautiful island of Tobago where we have the very distinct pleasure of hosting you for the next five days.

Back in 2005, our sister island of Trinidad had the distinction of hosting the 13th installment of this conference and by then, Trinidad had hosted the CPA Conference on quite a few occasions. As some of you may recall, I served as Presiding Officer of the Tobago
House of Assembly for a little over three years and I must confess that I was delighted as Presiding Officer of the Assembly Legislature in 2015 to offer Tobago as the venue for the 18th instalment of this conference. Indeed, the people of Tobago felt honoured when Tobago’s offer was accepted at the Conference in Bermuda later that year. It is, therefore, a distinct pleasure for me to stand here today as Chief Secretary speaking to you on this momentous occasion and to see among you many distinguished persons whom I still consider to be my esteemed parliamentary colleagues.

The 18th Biennial Conference of Presiding Officers and Clerks of the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association comes at a time when we as Parliamentarians face a public that is more discerning, more outspoken and more informed, but at the same time in some instances misinformed, than any time in the history of the world. At a time where Facebook and Instagram are competing with
mainstream media it is especially important that the operations of our Parliaments are, and appear to be, transparent.

As such the topic of Parliamentary Accountability bears significant relevance, as the overarching theme that will guide the discussions of the 15 Commonwealth Caribbean Nations represented at this gathering.

The wide-ranging discussions to be held over the next five days will seek to address matters such as:

- Topical procedural issues
- Improving relations between Parliament and Society
- Parliamentary Accountability
- Challenges faced by the Committee system in small Parliaments
- Support for legislatures in small island states and
- Parliamentary leadership.
With these topics in mind, we ought never to think that any one of us in any way is immune to the issues that affect our brother and sister Parliaments in other Commonwealth nations. There are many, many areas where we here in Trinidad and Tobago have work still to be done and, as such, being able to learn from our colleagues from neighbouring Commonwealth jurisdictions would be of great help in refining or redesigning our parliamentary processes and functions.

This conference comes as part of the mandate of the Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association to host biennial conferences with the goal of engendering common values among member states of the CPA through coming together, discussing and sharing information that comes out of our own, unique experience in our individual nations and territories.
For the remainder of this five-day period and, indeed, for the remainder of our public lives, I would like us to take guidance from an excerpt of an article written in the Harvard Business review on January 11th, 2016 which states, and I quote,

“Accountability is not simply taking the blame when something goes wrong. It is not a confession. Accountability is about delivering on a commitment. It’s responsibility to an outcome, not just a set of tasks. It’s taking initiative with thoughtful, strategic follow-through,” end quote.

For accountability to be done effectively, we must ensure that those tasked with the function of scrutiny are provided with the resources that they need to perform their function effectively and that those performing such functions are themselves held to the highest standards of accountability, and may I say as well, integrity.
As such, the role of oversight committees in parliamentary scrutiny must never go unnoticed, particularly in the context of small-island states such as ours. The limited size of our Legislatures too often means that our parliamentary committees face crippling limitations in terms of members as well as time available to serve. This results in Committee members often being overwhelmed and places limitations on how in-depth each committee’s investigations can go into each entity under its purview.

In the face of mounting concerns about accountability, we must therefore seize all opportunities to question the effectiveness of our mechanisms for ensuring such accountability. What checks and balances are employed to ensure that potential wrong doing by those engaged in public life does not happen, and that anyone who engages in such conduct is caught and brought to justice? What resources are allocated to entities whose mandate is to serve as watchdogs in the public sector? What follow-through is there in
instances where such entities must take action against a person or body found to be engaging in improper practices?

Yet another aspect of accountability that must be addressed is perception. Parliament must have a high-level of accountability and it must be so perceived by citizens. For this to be done the public must be well informed on initiatives and actions taken by their Parliaments to ensure that proper process is followed in all aspects of public life and procedure.

This is where the media, both traditional and social, can play an integral role. Radio, television and print remain mainstays in informing the population and shaping public opinion, but so too are social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. Effective use of, and partnerships with these types of media would, undoubtedly, help to maintain public trust in the legislature.
While the accountability role played by Parliament is more important than ever, Parliament must consciously share that work with other agencies. We must continue to foster working relationships with Ministries, divisions, the business sector, the media and the man in the street. This will, inevitably, help the wider public to be better informed about what its Parliament is doing with respect to the countless issues that affect citizens.

As members of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association we must ever be reminded of why the CPA exists; that is quote,

“To develop, promote and support Parliamentarians and their staff to identify benchmarks of good governance and to implement the enduring values of the Commonwealth,” end quote.

Some of these Commonwealth values are democracy, human rights, the rule of law, good governance, recognition of the needs
of small states and the recognition of the needs of vulnerable states, among others.

Let us never take lightly the responsibilities that lie before us as Presiding Officers, Clerks and representatives of our Parliaments and our nations.

Ladies and gentlemen, I really do not have the need to request additional time to complete my brief remarks, and perhaps I should say as well that the length of an address is not what necessarily defines a feature address, and therefore, in spite of the seriousness of the formalities that lie ahead at this conference, I do hope that each of you finds the time to enjoy the sights, the scenery, the food and indeed our very distinct and unique culture that we have to offer here in Tobago. As a matter of fact, you would have witnessed a taste of it a short while ago and I’m sure it would have set your hearts and minds racing and pounding and yearning to, I think it is
Thursday, when you will be treated to a more elaborate menu of our cultural interactions as well as our cultural tapestry.

Therefore, ladies and gentlemen let me take this opportunity as well to welcome you to what we like to call the Capital of Paradise. And I see a good friend of mine, the Clerk of Barbados looking at me in, as I would like to say, a particular tone of voice. But he would appreciate that Barbados is one of us in the Caribbean but, of course, it cannot beat us in respect of beauty.

So ladies and gentlemen I welcome you and I say to you please enjoy your stay here over the next five days and, at the end of which, I look forward to some of the quality deliberations that I am sure you will have as we seek to ensure that we place our Parliaments on a stronger footing given the fact that our democracy is always evolving.

I thank you.