Ensuring Adequate Parliamentary Scrutiny of
Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs

The great 17th century English poet, John Donne, who incidentally also served in the UK Parliament between 1601 and 1614, once wrote: “No man is an island, entire of itself.” Not even islands are islands anymore.

In our age, underlined by blogospheres, social networks and mobile applications, John Donne’s cliché certainly applies to us all. One cannot live on the upper floor thinking that life revolves only around one’s own country, around one’s own village and another one’s own constituency.

Foreign relations, and in our case, also Commonwealth relations, increasingly have a direct bearing on our day-to-day life. The role of parliaments in international relations is a must, as is the belief in the primacy of politics, which dictates that the representatives of the people should be involved.

Whether we like it or not, whether we want it or not, foreign relations are part and parcel of everyday life.
More than ever, legislative branches in a variety of countries, not least Commonwealth countries, even the smallest of countries, have set up specialised committees to scrutinize proposed regional and international legislation, such as conventions.

Their remit is to remove barriers in legislation which discriminate in favour of domestic recruitment, national capabilities and constitutions.

International affairs, and particularly international bodies such as the Commonwealth, play an increasingly important role in the system of governance. Their influence over national policies has been constantly and most consistently growing. The decisions taken in the international sphere influence the lives of millions of citizens.

The emergence of issues on a continental and global scale is all the more challenging the effectiveness and competence of national policies, and re-enforces the need for scrutiny and co-operation.

Parliamentary scrutiny becomes even more crucial in our times when most issues have become global.

Globalisation increases the role and competence of international politics, in which ambit, policy-making shifts from the national to the international level, making parliamentary involvement all the more relevant and necessary at this juncture.
It is therefore imperative that national legislative bodies continue to undertake with added zeal the task of parliamentary scrutiny of the work carried out in foreign and Commonwealth affairs.

International work often suffers from the so-called “democratic deficit” experienced by citizens vis-à-vis the relevance of foreign affairs to the course of the daily life in their town or village.

Symptoms of this institutional *malaise* can manifest themselves in a myriad of ways, namely

a) effective participation in debates;
b) effective consultation in the decision-making process;
c) transparency;
d) accountability; and
e) Information-dissemination mechanisms.

Clearly much improvement remains to be made in the way in which - and the levels up to which - national parliaments address international affairs as well as international institutions such as our Commonwealth.
Debates are essential to provide a channel for national parliaments to give valuable recommendations to their governments on related matters.

Control mechanisms are required for the enhancement of the overall operational transparency of international institutions.

It is however crucial to place the following recommendations into perspective.

Our legislative branches are comparatively small and therefore their support is also of a reduced format. Some would note that added scrutiny will invariably signify added secretarial and research staff, and therefore added strain on the financial and human resources of our small parliaments.

Understandably, one cannot bite more than one can chew, but with a pragmatic and creative approach, the current resources may be stretched, though not outstretched, to render service beyond their regular timetable, with a view to cover the international dimension.

Against this background, I would like to invite you to digest the following recommendations against the knowledge that all of us, including myself and my legislative branch, often encounter difficulties in the exercise of our duties vis-à-vis international affairs, bearing in mind that some of these recommendations stem from the desired goals which my own Parliament would like to attain.
Recommendations:

- Regular debates discussing activities of international institutions, particularly those activities directly relevant to national affairs, and reports submitted by the government.

- Shadowing and participant observation of debates so as to learn from each other thus disseminating good practices in practices and procedures.

- Setting-up of committees/sub-committees in national parliaments responsible for the follow-up of the government’s international affairs activities and for making recommendations.

- Ensuring that international affairs and activities related thereto are kept high on the national agenda with a view to help citizens understand the relevance of such undertakings.

- Including parliamentarians from the varied political spectrum represented in the House in national delegations participating in meetings of international institutions.

- Reserving seats for parliamentarians of both ruling and opposition parties in Commonwealth Assemblies as well as conference and meetings organised in its framework.
- A greater involvement of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association in the activities of the Commonwealth, particularly where input is required for the organisation of agendas and conclusions of important meetings such as the Commonwealth Head of Government Meeting.

- Re-enforced scrutiny procedures, whilst simultaneously organising seminars to discuss the use of comparative methods for exchange of ideas and best practices.

- A broader dissemination of documentation relevant to international events in the world of foreign affairs, in advance of, as opposed to, following an international meeting. One such example would be the Climate Change Summit, which is particularly relevant to small countries most notably to islands states. We are ourselves representatives of some of those island states.

- Greater openness to include the involvement of civil society through NGOs, the media, and the general public, particularly through the use of the internet.
One can of course, delve into a wide spectrum of recommendations.

However, my aim in this exercise is to concentrate on the few that matter to us as small states with small legislative bodies.

Small in size does not signify small in substance; and on this note, I invite you, Honourable Colleagues, to continue to digest these proposals, continue the discussion with a view to ensure that foreign and Commonwealth affairs meet within our respective parliaments the adequate parliamentary scrutiny that will enhance and bring to the fore even more the relevance of such affairs to the everyday life of our citizens.

Thank you.