REMARKS MADE AT THE 1ST MEETING OF THE SOCIETY OF CLERKS-AT-THE-TABLE HELD IN ACCRA, GHANA, BY DR WILLIAM F. SHIJA, SECRETARY-GENERAL, COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION:

3RD – 7TH APRIL, 2011
I was delighted to receive the invitation to attend this meeting, the first of its kind in Africa, from the Regional Secretary, Dr. Kashillilah.

I wish to thank most sincerely my friend and colleague, Emmanuel Anyimadu and his team, for the wonderful reception and hospitality that they gave us since we arrived here. It was typical of Ghanaian and African taste and culture. I bring you greetings from the Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee, Hon. Dato’ Seri Mohd. Shafie Apdal, Minister of Regional and Rural Development of Malaysia, the Vice Chairperson, Hon. Marwick Khumalo, MP., Swaziland, and the CPA Treasurer, Hon. Hashim Abdul Halim, MLA., and Speaker of the West Bengal Legislative Assembly until 10th May, 2011.

My colleague, Mr. Joe Omorodion, Assistant Director of Finance at the CPA Headquarters, and I, look forward to a fruitful experience and exchange at this meeting, under what we may term as the African ‘Neem-Tree’.

Madam Speaker, I believe that this meeting is another opportunity through which Africa seeks to secure internal solutions for the consolidation of democracy. We are a people looking for renewal by searching for methods to strengthen our democratic institutions for development.

The choice of the theme “The Role of Clerks-at-the-Table in Strengthening Democracy in the 21st Century” is timely because the players in the overall scheme of parliamentary strengthening are many. The 21st Century will itself be dominated by rapid communication technologies; hence more freedom of expression, speech and association.

In the past decade, there are many studies and organizations that have addressed this topical area of parliamentary strengthening. In Africa, studies on parliamentary strengthening have focused on governance as a key to development. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has for quite some time worked to strengthen parliaments through its own mission of ‘promoting the ‘advancement of parliamentary democracy’. 
By definition, ‘parliamentary democracy’ is a democratic system based on the strength of parliament or legislature. It is a governance system that is based on people’s power, choice, freedom and human rights. Many of us will recall that in the post-independence era Parliaments in Africa were weakened by one-party and military political structures. The weakening of the governance structures also weakened parliament.

During the 1970s and 1980s development partners preferred to work with the Executive to improve governance and development. However, since the early 1990s the importance of parliaments as key to governance and development has been recognised.

The recognition that parliaments are keys to national governance led organizations such as the IPU, World Bank, UNDP, National Democratic Institute, DFID, USAID, AWEPA, Canadian Parliamentary Centre and others, to change their approach. They started supporting parliaments in capacity building for members, parliamentary staff, parliamentary administrative and financial structures, and parliamentary committee systems and, at times, parliamentary infrastructure.

Further, the last decade has produced substantial literature to suggest that African parliaments needed, and had, to be effective. In order for parliamentarians to be effective, knowledge and skills were necessary to make structural and other changes. In 2005, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) observed, in part, that, the key functions of parliaments on legislation, oversight and representation are usually retarded by lack of knowledge and resources.

In this situation what has been the fate of parliamentary staff and what could they do to contribute to the strengthening of today’s parliament? The recent work by the CPA and partners has contributed greatly to the activities of parliamentary strengthening for members and parliamentary staff.

During the last five years, the CPA has encouraged its branches to plan and seek funding for Staff Development Programmes to strengthen parliaments. We have held Staff Development Workshops here in Africa, the Pacific, Asia, South East Asia, and the Caribbean. We have also facilitated parliamentary staff attachments in India, United Kingdom, Australia and some other Commonwealth countries. The feedback is that the workshops have greatly helped parliamentary staff in their capacity to handle parliamentary affairs.

Madam Speaker, based on this background, I wish to suggest to you that the Clerk-at-the-Table take the responsibilities of Advisor, Teacher/Trainer and Leader. The Clerk is the engine that powers the whole parliamentary machinery, including playing the role of Advisor to the Speaker, other Presiding Officers, as well as the Members of the House. The Clerk also advises Members through their political parties and those who sit as independents. The Clerk should therefore seize every opportunity to influence change and to advise for improvement. The role of the Clerk as advisor is also important to new and veteran members because the Clerk’s
team assists the Speaker to master-manage the conduct of the legislative process. The conduct of the legislative process includes committee work, members’ relations with their constituents, parliament’s finances and inter-parliamentary relations matters. To me, the Clerk’s advisory work is guided by skills, commitment and integrity. I urge you to use your position and opportunity to promote the integrity of parliament as a way of strengthening the institution.

Secondly, the Clerk should be considered to be a teacher/trainer. Carrying the flag of accumulated knowledge and experience, the Clerk should be ready to recruit, train and delegate duties to new entrants to the field. The Clerk’s teacher-role is considered paramount in strengthening parliament because the training of parliamentary work has been, and continues to be, best done on-the-job. This is why the CPA supports the establishment of the proposed Ghana Parliamentary Institute to which we have pledged to contribute £25,000. It is expected that its training methodology will rely heavily on the parliaments of Africa and elsewhere as its classrooms. I therefore submit that as a human resource development strategy, the Clerk should have the willpower to train others to expand, improve and modernize the institution of parliament. In other words, I urge all experienced parliamentary staff to vigorously prepare the younger generation to know, appreciate and contribute to the strengthening of the institution of parliament.

Madam Speaker, thirdly, to strengthen parliament in the 21st Century, the Clerk is called upon to take on a leadership responsibility. In Africa, we have our own fair share of poor leadership, hence the far cry of governance. Leadership is not simple; it calls for dedication, commitment and moral integrity. I am suggesting that since Africa’s growth potential needs to be managed and sustained by a commensurate leadership, the Clerk should play the crucial role of making parliaments stronger than before. To make a mark on Africa’s leadership in the 21st Century, parliament, particularly the long-term personnel of the Clerk’s team, must be part of the process of building a new leadership that is free of corruption. The new leadership must be the one which embraces the full democratic principles as well as the equitable distribution of national wealth.

I actually wish to suggest that the political upheavals currently going on in North Africa and the Middle East are manifestations of a search for new governance systems responsive to people’s rights and freedoms. A similar case has just occurred in The Sudan’s referendum to free South Sudan.

Finally, Madam Speaker, I wish to assure you that the CPA is here to work with you. Africa is the youngest region among the nine CPA regions that need assistance to strengthen their democratic institutions. Also, Africa has the youngest population. The 21st Century is going to be engrossed in rapid communications to constantly influence their opinions and perceptions on political and public policy. This state of affairs needs to be managed and, in my opinion, the Clerk will continuously be expected to play this important human resource role in order to strengthen and sustain Parliament as one of our important democratic structures and institutions.
I wish to take this opportunity to welcome you to London for the Centennial CPA Annual Conference in July. The Conference theme is ‘Reinforcing Democracy’. The larger Commonwealth theme for this year is ‘Women as Agents of Change’. In London, the CPA Working Party will continue to discuss the reform of the Association for the 21st Century, with the final report expected to be received and considered by the General Assembly in Sri Lanka next year. In London there will also be elections of the Chairperson of the Executive Committee and the Treasurer of the Association. You, the Clerks of the Parliaments of Africa, are essential partners of this process and I look forward to seeing you in London in July. Please assist your delegates to register early after taking care of the membership fees for your Branch as soon as possible.

Madam Speaker, Ladies and Gentlemen, I wish you all fruitful deliberations of this meeting and God Bless You.

Thank you.