

# 68<sup>TH</sup> COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE

## *NAVIGATING CHALLENGES, EXPLORING PRIORITIES* *A WORLD CAFÉ DIALOGUE*

### CPA SMALL BRANCHES WORKSHOP RESEARCH BRIEFING

#### **Executive Summary**

CPA Small Branches Parliaments within the Commonwealth, defined as jurisdictions with populations of up to one million people, are pivotal to democratic governance, yet they face a unique and formidable set of challenges. This report summarises these systemic issues, which primarily include **limited resources**, a significant **over-reliance on the executive**, and critical **technological capacity gaps**. These challenges threaten parliamentary independence and effectiveness, undermining the very principles of accountability and good governance they are meant to uphold. As noted by the Commonwealth Secretariat, small states are particularly vulnerable due to their reliance on trade and limited access to finance (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2021).

To navigate these hurdles, the report identifies and explores four key priorities that are essential for strengthening CPA Small Branches Parliaments. The first is to reinforce the **Separation of Powers** to ensure institutional independence and robust oversight of the executive. The second is to address the chronic **Infrastructure and Resource** deficits, providing Parliaments with the fundamental tools, staff, and physical space required to function effectively. The third is to strategically leverage **Technology as a Key Enabler**, using digital tools to enhance legislative work, improve data management, and foster public engagement (IPU, 2024). The final priority is to champion **Collaboration**—both within individual Parliaments and across the wider Commonwealth—to facilitate

knowledge-sharing and resource pooling (CPA, 2023). The report concludes that by addressing these priorities, CPA Small Branch Parliaments can transform their challenges into opportunities, leading to more responsive governments, enhanced policymaking, and greater public trust in democratic institutions.

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## 1. Introduction

Within the vast and diverse Commonwealth, CPA Small Branches—jurisdictions with populations of up to one million people—occupy a unique and critical position. From island nations in the Caribbean and the Pacific to micro-states in Europe, these territories are often characterised by small economies, limited physical size, and a highly concentrated political landscape. Despite their small scale, these Parliaments are the lifeblood of their respective democracies, acting as the legislative and oversight bodies that represent the will of their people. However, their size is not merely a demographic fact; it presents a unique set of structural and systemic challenges that significantly impact their ability to function effectively. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) Small Branches network was specifically created to address the "particular needs and requirements" of these smaller jurisdictions (CPA, 2023).

For this report, it is crucial to understand the following key terms within the context of a CPA Small Branch Parliament:

- **Separation of Powers:** The fundamental principle of democratic governance where the legislative (Parliament), executive (government), and judicial (courts) powers are vested in separate bodies to prevent the concentration of power and ensure a system of checks and balances. In a CPA Small Branches, this separation is often conceptually clear but practically tenuous due to a small pool of political actors (Transparency International, 2022).
- **Infrastructure:** The physical and institutional resources necessary for a Parliament to operate. This includes parliamentary buildings, IT networks, research facilities, and, crucially, a professional, non-partisan support staff (CPA, 2023).
- **Technology as an Enabler:** The use of digital tools and platforms not merely for convenience but as a strategic force multiplier to overcome resource limitations. In this context, it refers to using technology to enhance efficiency, transparency,

public access, and collaboration in legislative processes (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2024).

The importance of these Parliaments in promoting democratic governance, despite facing significant challenges, cannot be overstated. They are the engines of public accountability and legislative change in their jurisdictions. Navigating their unique challenges is therefore not just a matter of institutional development but of safeguarding democratic principles across a significant portion of the Commonwealth.

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## 2. Challenges Faced by CPA Small Branches Parliaments

CPA Small Branches Parliaments operate in an environment where their small size becomes a source of systemic vulnerability. The concentration of political talent and resources in these jurisdictions leads to three primary, interconnected challenges.

### Limited Resources

The most immediate and pervasive challenge for CPA Small Branches is a chronic lack of resources. Due to their small tax bases and economies, parliamentary budgets are often minimal. This financial constraint has a ripple effect across all aspects of their work.

- **Budget Constraints:** Limited budgets mean Parliaments struggle to fund essential functions. They may not have the resources for proper research staff, legislative drafting expertise, or professional development for members and staff (UNDP, 2021). This forces Parliamentarians to rely heavily on external information or the executive's policy proposals, limiting their ability to engage in independent scrutiny. A recent handbook from the CPA noted that resource limitations often make it difficult for members to introduce private member's bills (CPA & McGill, 2022).
- **Small Staff and Inadequate Infrastructure:** Many CPA Small Branches Parliaments operate with a tiny support staff, sometimes just a single clerk and a few assistants. This lack of human resource capacity means Parliamentarians are often left to manage their own research, constituent relations, and administrative tasks, leaving little time for focused legislative work. Furthermore, physical infrastructure can be inadequate, with Parliaments sometimes housed in shared or temporary buildings that lack modern facilities for meetings, public engagement, and secure data storage (Caribbean Development Bank, 2022).

## Over-reliance on the Executive

In a CPA Small Branches, the lines between the executive and legislative branches can become dangerously blurred, creating a risk of executive dominance that undermines the core principle of Separation of Powers.

- **Dual Roles and Blurred Lines:** Due to the small pool of available talent, it is common for Parliamentarians to also hold ministerial portfolios or other executive roles. This concentration of power in a small number of individuals makes it difficult for them to hold the executive to account when they are themselves part of it (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2024; DCAF, 2022).
- **Limited Oversight:** The small size of the opposition, or in some cases a total lack of an opposition, means there is often little political incentive for the executive to be transparent. Parliamentary Committees, which are the main engines of scrutiny in larger Parliaments, may be non-existent or lack the power and resources to conduct effective investigations or public hearings (IPU, 2023). However, a key exception noted by the World Bank is that Public Accounts Committees in many Commonwealth countries are effectively chaired by a member of the opposition, providing a crucial check on financial management (World Bank, 2011).

## Lack of Technological Capacity

While technology has the potential to solve many of the challenges faced by CPA Small Branches, it often remains out of reach due to a lack of both financial and human capital.

- **Limited Access to Digital Tools:** Many CPA Small Branches Parliaments lack access to modern digital tools for legislative work, such as secure e-Parliament platforms, digital archives, and data management systems. This forces them to rely on outdated, paper-based processes that are inefficient and limit their ability to collaborate (CPA, 2023). The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) has noted a growing "digital divide" where small Parliaments are falling behind in adopting new technologies (IPU, 2024).
- **Absence of Data Infrastructure:** Without proper data infrastructure, it is difficult for Parliaments to access and analyse key data related to national statistics, public spending, and policy outcomes. This lack of evidence-based capacity further weakens their ability to effectively scrutinise executive decisions and to propose well-informed alternative policies. A Westminster Foundation for Democracy report (2023) highlights that the lack of data infrastructure is a significant barrier to effective parliamentary oversight.

Democracy report highlighted that an effective external digital presence relies on robust internal digital structures (WFD, 2022).

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### 3. Priority 1: Separation of Powers and Institutional Independence

Strengthening the **Separation of Powers** is the foundational priority for CPA Small Branches Parliaments seeking to assert their independence and enhance their effectiveness. Given the natural tendency towards executive dominance, proactive measures are essential to create and maintain a system of robust checks and balances (ODIHR, 2025).

- **Strengthening Committees and Oversight:** Parliamentary Committees are the lifeblood of legislative scrutiny. CPA Small Branches Parliaments should prioritise establishing and empowering permanent, bipartisan committees with the authority to hold public hearings, summon ministers, and commission independent research (Commonwealth Secretariat, 2024). This formalises the oversight function and provides a forum for in-depth analysis that the full chamber may not have time for.
- **Empowering the Speaker's Office:** The role of the Speaker is crucial. Strengthening the independence of the Speaker's Office—for example, by having a fixed term, a non-political appointment process, or a clear constitutional mandate—can ensure that parliamentary proceedings are fair, impartial, and not subject to executive interference. The Speaker can be a powerful guardian of parliamentary rules and traditions.
- **Constitutional and Institutional Reforms:** To truly embed the Separation of Powers, some jurisdictions may need to consider constitutional reforms that clearly delineate the roles of the legislative and executive branches. This could include establishing independent offices, such as an Ombudsman or an Auditor General, to provide a layer of external scrutiny that is vital in a small political ecosystem (UN Women, 2022; DCAF, 2022).



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#### 4. Priority 2: Infrastructure and Resources for Effective Parliamentary Work

For a Parliament to function effectively, it must have the necessary physical and human resources. Addressing the chronic underfunding of parliamentary operations is a critical step towards empowering CPA Small Branches.

- **Robust Parliamentary Buildings:** While perhaps a luxury for some, a dedicated parliamentary building is more than just a symbol. It provides a secure and accessible space for legislative work, public engagement, and secure document

storage. Upgrading existing buildings or constructing new ones can provide the necessary facilities for committee meetings, research, and public galleries, reinforcing the Parliament's central role in national life (CPA, 2023).

- **Adequate Staffing and Budget:** A Parliament is only as strong as its support staff. CPA Small Branches should **prioritise** funding for a professional, non-partisan parliamentary service, including dedicated clerks, legal drafters, and research officers (CPA, 2023). This provides Parliamentarians with the technical expertise and background information they need to effectively scrutinise complex legislation and hold the executive to account.
- **Budgetary Autonomy:** A Parliament's budget should be independent of direct executive control. Granting parliamentary services the power to manage their own budget can prevent the executive from using financial leverage to undermine legislative independence. This is a key recommendation from the CPA and other parliamentary development organisations (CPA, 2023).

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## 5. Priority 3: Technology as a Key Enabler

Technology has the potential to level the playing field for CPA Small Branches Parliaments, acting as a force multiplier that can overcome resource limitations and geographic isolation.

- **Digital Tools for Legislative Work:** Embracing technology is crucial. Parliaments can implement secure e-Parliament platforms for legislative drafting and document management. Digital tools can facilitate virtual meetings for members who are geographically dispersed and provide secure communication channels for sensitive information. An "e-Hansard" system, for example, can make parliamentary records instantly accessible to staff, members, and the public, improving efficiency and transparency (WFD, 2022).
- **Enhancing Transparency and Public Engagement:** Technology can transform public access to parliamentary processes. By live-streaming sessions, posting digital copies of bills and committee reports, and using social media, Parliaments can demystify their work and encourage greater public engagement. This helps to build public trust and provides a check on executive power. A 2020 report from the UK Parliament highlighted the positive potential of digital platforms to engage citizens with democratic processes (UK Parliament, 2020).



- **Building Technological Capacity:** The adoption of technology requires investment in training for both Parliamentarians and staff. It is not enough to provide the hardware; Parliaments must also invest in building the digital literacy and capacity to use these tools effectively. The IPU's "Guide to digital transformation in Parliaments" emphasises that a shift in culture is as important as the technology itself (IPU, 2023).
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## 6. Priority 4: Collaboration Within and Between Parliaments

Collaboration is a powerful mechanism for addressing the shared challenges of CPA Small Branches Parliaments. By working together, they can pool resources, share knowledge, and amplify their collective influence.

- **Intra-Parliamentary Collaboration:** Within a small Parliament, fostering a culture of collaboration is essential. Cross-party caucuses, particularly among women Parliamentarians, can be highly effective in advancing common agendas, such as gender equality legislation (UN Women, 2022). The small number of members can be an advantage, facilitating more direct and informal collaboration that might be difficult in a larger Parliament.
  - **Regional and International Cooperation:** CPA Small Branches should actively participate in regional and international parliamentary organisations, such as the **Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)**. These forums provide invaluable opportunities for knowledge-sharing on best practices in legislative reform, procedural management, and institutional strengthening (CPA, 2023). Collaborative initiatives can include joint training programmes, peer-to-peer mentoring, and the development of shared digital resources to reduce costs and increase capacity (IPU, 2024).
  - **Resource Pooling:** In the future, CPA Small Branches could explore the possibility of pooling resources for shared services, such as legislative drafting, research, or IT support. A group of island nations, for example, could jointly fund a regional office that provides specialised parliamentary support, a resource they could not afford individually (CPA & McGill, 2022).
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## 7. Social and Political Implications



Overcoming the challenges faced by CPA Small Branches Parliaments has far-reaching implications for strengthening democracy, governance, and political stability in their respective jurisdictions.

- **Improved Policymaking:** When Parliaments are well-resourced and independent, they can engage in more effective scrutiny of policy. This leads to better-informed decisions, more robust legislation, and policies that are more responsive to the needs of the population.
- **Enhanced Accountability:** A strong Parliament serves as the primary check on the power of the executive. By strengthening parliamentary oversight, CPA Small Branches can ensure that public funds are managed responsibly and that governments are held to account for their actions. This reduces the risk of corruption and fosters a culture of transparency (Transparency International, 2022).
- **Greater Public Trust:** When citizens see their Parliament operating independently, transparently, and effectively, it builds trust in democratic institutions. This increased trust encourages greater civic engagement, strengthens democratic norms, and contributes to the long-term political stability of the nation. The viability of a democracy is ultimately tied to the legitimacy of its institutions in the eyes of the public.

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## 8. Conclusion

CPA Small Branches Parliaments are vital to the health of democracy in the Commonwealth, yet they are burdened by unique challenges that threaten to undermine their independence and effectiveness. The chronic lack of resources, the systemic risk of executive over-dominance, and significant technological gaps are not insurmountable obstacles. This report has outlined a clear path forward, highlighting four key priorities that can transform these jurisdictions.

By **strengthening the Separation of Powers**, investing in crucial **infrastructure and resources**, **embracing technology as a key enabler**, and **fostering collaboration**, CPA Small Branches Parliaments can not only survive but thrive. The recommendations offered here are not abstract ideals but practical steps that can be implemented to empower Parliamentarians and their support staff. The Commonwealth and its member states have a shared interest in supporting these efforts, as the long-term stability and

democratic vitality of the entire family of nations depends on the health of its smallest members.

## Recommendations

1. **For Parliaments and Governments:** Prioritise legislative and constitutional reforms that strengthen the independence of the parliamentary service and the Speaker's Office. Allocate a fixed, non-reducible percentage of the national budget to the Parliament to ensure its financial autonomy.
2. **For Technology and Infrastructure:** Invest in the development and maintenance of a secure, modern e-Parliament platform. Partner with regional and international organisations to acquire affordable hardware and software and to provide comprehensive digital literacy training for all members and staff.
3. **For Collaboration:** CPA Small Branches Parliaments should actively participate in regional parliamentary associations. Establish formal mechanisms for intra-parliamentary collaboration on key issues and explore shared service models for legislative support.

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