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**Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Annual Conference 2009**

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**"The Commonwealth and the CPA: Meeting Future Global Challenges."**

**I am very honoured to be here, and to be given the opportunity to address you today, as part of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's 55<sup>th</sup> Annual Conference.**

**I would like to thank Dr William Shija, the Secretary-General of the CPA for the invitation to participate at this important conference.**

**I bring with me the warm greetings of the Commonwealth Secretary-General, Kamallesh Sharma who is currently attending the Commonwealth Finance Ministers Meeting in Cyprus, Greece where a collective response to the global economic situation, with particular reference to the challenges of small states and vulnerable states, will be explored.**

**He has, therefore, asked me to express his sincere apologies and his good wishes for the success of this important conference.**

**We are also grateful to Honourable Samuel Sitta, Speaker of the Tanzanian Parliament, for hosting this event which provides the platform for parliamentarians, who are critical stakeholders in the democratic process, to interact and exchange views.**

#### **IMPORTANCE OF PARLIAMENTS AND PARLIAMENTARIANS**

**Parliament as an institution is the very embodiment of democracy in a country. And parliamentarians are at the heart of the democratic process.**

**In a system where legitimacy is predicated upon the will of the people, national parliaments, state assemblies and local councils are where the people's representatives gather, serving the people, holding governments accountable and ensuring democracy delivers for all the people.**

**At the Commonwealth Secretariat we often refer to democracy and development as the twin pillars of our work. We pursue both, seeing the benefits of both and acknowledging the inter-relationship between the two.**

**Sometimes the 'democracy agenda' is pushed to the detriment of development, at other times it is vice versa. For me they are like food and water. If you demand just one it is not long until you demand the other! They reinforce each other, they sustain each other, and we need both.**

**It is the parliament of a country which is at the forefront of a country's willingness and capacity to deliver. Parliament is where governments and opposition come together face-to-face to discuss, to disagree, to find compromise, to win some political battles, but lose others.**

**And so I applaud the work CPA does, in seeking to enhance the capacity, the integrity of parliaments across the Commonwealth, by providing support, advice and solidarity to its members.**

**We work closely with the CPA, for instance by co-operating on capacity-building work in support of strengthening parliaments. In the recent past we have done this in Uganda and Guyana. We have also jointly organised a series of workshops on Government & Opposition, most recently in West Africa in June 2008. This workshop brought together representatives from across the region to**

**discuss the roles and responsibilities of government and opposition parties – in short how to make them partners in the development of the democratic process, and not adversaries.**

**I had the privilege of participating in the West Africa workshop, which was my first as Deputy Secretary-General. It was a motivating and worthwhile experience for me. During the workshop, it was clear that there are key elements that can strengthen a parliament and ensure it is a place where both government and opposition can work collaboratively to improve the lives of the people.**

**To achieve this goal, it is imperative that we help to create strong and enduring democratic institutions. Visionary leaders play a vital role, but there needs to be a stress on the importance of institutions, not just of leadership. Ultimately it is strong, credible and independent institutions which will endure and ensure the fruits of democracy are for the many and not just the few.**

**Of course no one-size fits all, and democracy around the Commonwealth takes on varied forms, reflecting**

**national circumstances. However we all know that certain ingredients are essential to any democracy.**

**Much work remains to be done, but we remain committed and optimistic.**

#### **THE COMMONWEALTH AND DEMOCRACY**

**When one considers the scale and diversity of the Commonwealth, it is intriguing to behold that we have found consensus on such a broad range of issues. This is one of the unique features of the Commonwealth.**

**As you will be aware, we have the Commonwealth Declarations of 1971 and 1991, which set out our fundamental political values. Further, our “Latimer House” principles of 2003 define and differentiate the roles of the three branches of government: the executive, the legislature and the judiciary.**

**Democracy is a journey not a destination. It is therefore imperative that we avoid complacency and consolidate the democratic gains we have recorded in recent times. Democracy needs constantly to be nurtured, protected and promoted.**

**It is therefore imperative that political leaders resist the temptation to restrict the democratic space in their countries. In this regard, Parliaments have a critical role to play in safeguarding political freedoms and civil liberties. This is more so because we have seen situations where media freedoms have been limited, civil society constrained and state institutions and resources used for the benefit of the ruling party. In extreme cases, attempts have been made to amend the Constitution for partisan political purposes. Ultimately, this can only undermine the credibility of democratic institutions and political processes and make people lose faith in democracy.**

**A key focus of our work over the years has been on elections. Of course democracy is about so much more than elections, but it is during an election or as a consequence of an election that tension, conflict and violence can come to the fore.**

**The Commonwealth Secretariat, in collaboration with the CPA and other partners, will continue to provide democracy advisory services and explore ways to offer additional support particularly in the conduct and operations of election management bodies.**

**Our goal is to create a commonwealth of democracies where a genuine, credible election, reflecting the will of the people, determines the credibility and legitimacy of the elected legislature and the government.**

**We must also focus attention on the issue of participation. If parliaments and politics are to be representative and inclusive then we have to make sure that all sectors of society can and do participate.**

**Two areas which are of particular importance are women and youth. The Commonwealth target of at least 30 per cent of women in positions of decision making by 2015 is a good starting point and we would encourage member states to continue to strive to attain this goal.**

**On youth issues, it is estimated that nearly half of the Commonwealth's citizens are youth. The future is theirs, so we need to make sure they are involved in the decisions of today because they will live with the consequences. Indeed, the theme of this 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary year is 'Serving a New generation'. So, one of the objectives of the forthcoming**

**Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Port of Spain next month is to refocus attention on youth in a more practical way.**

**At CHOGM, besides the global economic challenges, leaders will also deliberate on topical issues such as climate change where leaders are expected to send a strong political message to the Copenhagen Summit in December.**

#### **CONCLUSION**

**During the Government and Opposition workshop in West Africa I mentioned earlier, where Dr. Shija was also present, one of the participants presented us with a challenge. In reflecting on the state of politics at this time in West Africa, in this instance, he said: "*We have not failed. The question is where we are going and what do we need to get there*"**

**This view point is both realistic and optimistic. But it is the kind of 'open-eyed but open hearted' approach that we need.**

**Organisations like the Commonwealth, and its constituent parts, have a key role to play in helping to define 'where we are going' and 'what do we need to get there'. You, the parliamentarians of the**



**Commonwealth are at heart of this important journey.**

**Before I conclude, I would like to draw your attention to a recent initiative led by the Royal Commonwealth Society called the Commonwealth Conversation. The initiative aims to raise awareness about what the Commonwealth is and does. The Commonwealth Secretary-General has welcomed the initiative and looks forward to the new ideas that it will bring. As representatives of the people, your support in ensuring continuing dialogue about the Commonwealth and through this initiative will be invaluable.**

**I wish you well during the days of this conference and in the vital roles you all fulfil in your respective countries.**

**I thank you.**