

WELCOME ADDRESS AT THE OPENING OF THE FIRST ANNUAL  
COMMONWEALTH CARIBBEAN PARLIAMENTARY WORKSHOP

LEARNING RESOURCE CENTRE  
UNIVERSITY OF THE WEST INDIES  
ST. AUGUSTINE CAMPUS  
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It is with great pleasure that I welcome all of you to the first-ever Commonwealth Caribbean Parliamentary Workshop hosted by the Constitutional Affairs and Parliamentary Studies Unit of the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine.

The common connection between all of the participants attending this Workshop is that we come from countries that belong to the Commonwealth of Nations. We warmly welcome all of our overseas visitors and participants and we hope that you enjoy your time with us in Trinidad and Tobago.

The concept of the Commonwealth is perhaps the one common denominator that runs through this Workshop alongside the fact that the study of Parliament lies at the core of the exercise.

But what is it about the Commonwealth that would bring us together to discuss common themes ? This event is not being hosted by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association or the Commonwealth Secretariat. Yet, it is that notion of “Commonwealth” that somehow provides us with a link between Trinidad and Tobago, Jamaica, Dominica, Canada, Ghana and the United Kingdom who are all represented here by parliamentarians or parliamentary officials.

Ghana will celebrate its fiftieth anniversary of independence on March 6<sup>th</sup> instant and we extend our heartiest congratulations to them on such an occasion. In five years’ time Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago will join them. They all became members of the Commonwealth, like so many other former colonies of Great Britain, after they got their independence. The Faculty of Social Sciences will host a one-day seminar on March 6<sup>th</sup> to discuss Ghana, fifty years after independence as the prelude to a five-year Faculty of Social Sciences research project to study these former African and Caribbean colonies of Great Britain as they face their fiftieth anniversaries of independence.

Back in the early 1960s, the question of what the Commonwealth would look like, given the thrust of the independence movement, was a matter of considerable discussion within Whitehall departments in London.

In a secret note prepared by the then Secretary of the Cabinet, Norman Brook, entitled “EVOLUTION OF THE COMMONWEALTH” dated 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1962 for the consideration of British Ministers (and now declassified), the following excerpts may cause us to reflect on the meaning of the Commonwealth for us today :

A. Paragraph 3 of the Cabinet Note stated, inter alia :

“3. It may be, however, that before examining these practical problems Ministers would wish first to consider the larger question – what is the significance and purpose of the Commonwealth in the years ahead ? What function and value will this new Commonwealth have in the modern world ?

What are the links which will bind its members together ? There was a time when they were united by their allegiance to a common Crown. In the ‘thirties’, after the Ottawa Conference, there was a period when it seemed possible that they could form an interdependent economic unit; but this possibility has been progressively eroded, not by the United Kingdom, but by the economic development of the other members. Later, it could be said for a time that they all had in common a way of life based on Parliamentary democracy and the common law; but the logic of events in Pakistan and in Ghana and the possible course of constitutional development elsewhere have made it necessary to mute this claim. Now, it is difficult to find any factor common to them all save the use of the English language and the fact that all were once parts of the British Empire.”

These common denominators still remain today. However, the study of the working of Parliament provides us with a powerful attraction to engage in academic discourse on a subject that may appear arcane to some, and appealing to others.

We do not intend to limit ourselves to the Commonwealth Caribbean alone owing to the title of this Workshop, however, by learning about factors that impact upon the working of Parliaments in various parts of the Commonwealth, we hope to push back the frontiers of knowledge on this subject area.

My colleagues and I intend to make this a research niche for which the University of the West Indies at St. Augustine will become renowned. The formation of the Constitutional Affairs and Parliamentary Studies Unit (CAPSU) is designed to advance this cause. Today may be considered the launch date of the Unit and we hope that our efforts will provide a deeper understanding of the functions of Commonwealth Caribbean Parliaments, while providing a link to the study of Parliaments throughout the Commonwealth.

Of the fifty functioning national Parliaments of the Commonwealth (excluding all of the suspended members including the latest one – Fiji), there are seventeen countries with bicameral (or two-chamber Parliaments). Interestingly, eight of those seventeen are to be found in the Commonwealth Caribbean. Anyone wishing to study bicameralism further will find us to be a fertile field for research and collaboration on the subject.

I have been inspired by the work and workshops organized by my academic colleague, Professor the Lord Norton of Louth (better known in the academic world as the renowned parliamentary scholar Phillip Norton). He would have been here, however, I received the following message from him recently :

“Many apologies for the delay in replying. I had not forgotten your kind invitation, but I was leaving it until the last minute in order to see whether commitments here would permit me to attend the Workshop. I did not want to accept and then find that parliamentary business prevented me from attending. In the event, my caution has proved justified. I now have to be here during the time of the Workshop; the parliamentary business for the week commencing 8th January means I have to be in the House on the Tuesday and Wednesday.

I am so sorry that I will not be able to be with you for the inaugural Workshop, but I hope it proves a great success. I know various colleagues, including Xiudian Dai, are attending and are greatly looking forward to it.

Again, my many apologies and all best wishes for the New Year and the Workshop.”

I am also indeed extremely grateful to the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago for all of the assistance that they have given to this event and I wish to personally thank the Honourable Barendra Sinanan, M.P., Speaker of the House of Representatives as well as the President of the Senate, Senator the Honourable Dr. Linda Baboolal, M.P.

In closing, I shall revert to the final paragraph of Norman Brook's declassified Cabinet Note on the Commonwealth of 24<sup>th</sup> April, 1962 :

B. "6. Despite the difficulties, we still have three assets. First, there is the common link of the English language. Secondly, there is the fact that new members, on attaining independence, are choosing voluntarily to preserve the Commonwealth connexion and, though, they may not be actively with us in the East-West struggle, are at least refraining from joining the other side. Thirdly, to the extent that we succeed in holding this new Commonwealth together, we shall demonstrate that peoples of different races can co-operate in a multi-racial association in an atmosphere of mutual tolerance; and in a world of increasing racial tension this, if we can achieve it, will be a valuable contribution to peace. We may have to alter the aim of Commonwealth co-operation, and to set our sights lower. We shall certainly have to devise new methods and procedures for Commonwealth consultation. But, if we are quick to adjust ourselves to the new situation, we may still be able to distil from the Commonwealth connexion some essential values – for ourselves and for the world."

In launching this annual workshop, one can only hope that we have devised a new method and procedure for Commonwealth consultation among parliamentarians, parliamentary officials and parliamentary scholars using the forum of the University of the West Indies.

I thank you.