

OPENING ADDRESS
TO THE 33RD CONFERENCE
OF THE CARIBBEAN, THE AMERICAS AND THE ATLANTIC REGION OF
THE COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY ASSOCIATION
JUNE 29TH 2008, CUISINART HOTEL, ANGUILLA

Your Excellency and Honourables all, in this case, truly, too numerous to mention, including our invited guests who are Anguillian and those who live and work here with us - welcome. I echo the sentiments of all the speakers before me who have so warmly welcomed our visiting Parliamentarians from across the region and from Bermuda. I also welcome the observers from the Canada CPA region and from the British Isles and Mediterranean CPA Region. You have come a long way to be with us and we are very happy to have you.

This is indeed an honour for the “Rock” as we affectionately call Anguilla to play host to you for this 33rd Regional Commonwealth Parliamentary Association Conference. As part of a plan I had devised to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of our House of Assembly, I asked our Deputy Speaker who represented us at last year’s Regional Conference in the

Cayman Islands to see if she could maneuver Anguilla on to the Regional executive so that we could better take advantage of the truly good and important work the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association has done and is doing regionally and internationally. Not only did she succeed in doing this but she also landed Anguilla with the onerous task of hosting this year's conference. Before I could balk or back track on accepting that commitment, the Hon. Chief Minister who was attending a Heads of O.T Governments Conference in the Cayman Islands at the same time, confirmed over dinner to the CPA's regional Secretary with his usual effusiveness, that Anguilla would be delighted to host the event. So being well and truly stuck with my ambition, here we are.

I believe we are the smallest branch of the region to host the Regional Conference thus far. But it is my sincere hope that by the end of it not only would we have leaned more from each other and made another small step in improving the Governance of our Territories and Nations, but that our guests would have enjoyed their brief stay with us and learned a little more about another corner of the continent of islands which is the Caribbean and which we all call home.

"They say that if you give a politician some facts, he'll draw his own confusions". Well one of the great things about the CPA is that it never tries to confuse but instead tries to provide a platform for politicians to

learn by example, interaction, precedent and multifaceted modes of information, the rules, duties, opportunities and responsibilities of good parliamentary practice. It is a global organization which faces the reality that because our countries are committed to the democratic process, a trained physician or computer analyst, an educated banker or hotelier, an experienced farmer or fisherman can suddenly find him or herself elected to Parliament without any training or experience in what it means to be an effective Parliamentarian. In cases such as these and in others CPA is there to help.

In my own experience I can tell you that before my own election as a Speaker I had very little knowledge of the skills that would make for a good Speaker and have more than once felt in the words of a Parliamentary friend from Canada, like a duck, calm and collected from the surface up or from the desk top up, but underneath the desk, paddling like crazy in trying to figure out what next to do. I can say without fear of contradiction that I have benefited enormously from two OECS Speaker's Conferences held in St. Kitts and Antigua, sponsored by the CPA and attended on both occasions by the Secretary General himself, who is unavoidably unable to be with us at this meeting.

Mahatma Ghandi once said that "democracy, disciplined and enlightened is the finest thing in the world", Parliaments are at the core of the

practice of democracy. Every member is a vitally important part of its machinery. A parliament represents people, they discuss, they agree, they disagree, they find consensus, and they deliver on behalf of people. As the CPA has stressed on the front of some of its publications “its not just talk”. But on the other hand it cannot work without talk. Every Government must be challenged over its ideas, and decisions should only be made when everyone feels they have had a hearing. The philosopher Edmund Burke explained the basis of its ethos in 1774 when he said that “parliament is not a congress of ambassadors from different hostile interests; which interests each must maintain as an agent and advocate against the other agents and advocates: Parliament is a deliberative assembly of one nation, with one interest, that of the whole, where, not local purposes, not local prejudices ought to guide, but the general good, resulting from the general reason of the whole”.

No other region in what has been called the third world has had, for so long, so much liberal politics. The Caribbean’s capacity to sustain liberal democratic politics is impressive. Anglophone Caribbean countries have consistently held fair elections and have been, free with one exception from unconstitutional transfers of power. But as good as that record has been we still need to ask ourselves weather or not our democracy has been disciplined and enlightened enough as Ghandi hoped and weather or not our Parliaments are as Burke put it, truly deliberative assemblies

of the nation, reasoning for the good of the whole? We are all aware that Government by cabinet and not by Parliament, is too often the norm in our region. Because of the small size of most of our Parliaments, Government's command of the passage of legislation, or the approval or defeat of motions is often so overwhelming that parliamentary practice can at times be merely a ritual and not a substantive process which reflects a genuine practice of democracy. After all, we Speakers who are normally not allowed to speak, (except at CPA meetings), seem relegated to the benediction like refrain of "the eyes have it". This democratic deficit has been compounded of late in many of our territories by the rise of single issue groups and NGO's in civil society which to a degree have supplanted the role of the Opposition. While it is certainly a good thing for democracy for more people to join the political debate, we have to ask whether they are doing so in order to fill a vacuum left by restrictive measures placed on the Opposition or by the Opposition's own neglect of its Parliamentary role of providing oversight and holding Government to account.

But structural issues aside there is also an issue of Parliamentary culture to be looked at. Do we do enough to enlighten our parliaments not only about the issues but also about the duties, responsibilities and importance of Parliament to the sustenance of democracy in our territories and nations? Are we for example bold enough to extend the

reach of parliament to include in its committee systems, especially in our resource starved small Parliaments where committees are almost defunct, the membership of non elected citizens of talent and skill to assist in matters of oversight, something I have long advocated. It is here that the CPA continues to play a vital role. The Secretary General of the CPA Dr. William Shija of Tanzania expressed it simply and well when he said that “the CPA is above all an association of people; of colleagues and friends sharing their experiences and learning from each other”. The successful evolution of Parliamentary democracy in our region and the globe to a large extent rests on that fact. Where innovation occurs, whether subtle or dramatic, the chance to learn is guaranteed by colleagues and friends sharing experiences and learning from each other.

They say that deceased politicians go to heaven and play harps. They’re good at pulling strings. So then all good Parliamentarians pulling the right strings could make some good music even though it may not be celestial. For never before in the history of our Islands and nations do we need to pull more strings to deal effectively with issues of crime, globalization, the growing reality of the loss of sovereignty to multi national treaty obligations, climate change, real issues of real sustainability, energy independence, health care, an ever increasing demand for rapidly expanding skill based economies and the demands on our educational services, and a host of other issues which are

peculiar to each island and common to all. If Parliamentarians are to give proper representation both in and outside Parliament it is imperative that they be enlightened and do their very best amidst the cacophony of global media and information overload, to understand the forces, local, regional and global which impact our communities.

Over the next few days we will be discussing formally and informally some of these issues. It is my sincere hope that our own parliamentarians will seize the chance to listen to the experience of their regional colleagues as our rock, Anguilla, marches on in transition from a dusty colonial backwater through revolution and into a modern mini state with all its attendant opportunities and difficulties. We too have a story to tell which might help our regional colleagues as well as they too deal with the trials of the present age.

But in the midst of all the serious stuff I trust that we will, as all good parliamentarians do, have a laugh at ourselves and the unique theatre that Parliament oftentimes is and swap stories of the same. We do indeed have our stories and our bloopers which are worthy of historical record.

You have for instance been welcomed by the senior opposition member in our house the Honourable Hubert Hughes. You might ask him for instance how he managed some years ago to speak in the budget debate

for a full five days when the budget was less than 20 million. _EC\$ That took some exceptional parliamentary skill, and thank God, I was not the Speaker. Or about one of our past members who on speaking of the redevelopment of agriculture in Anguilla and on the refurbishment of the “Plot” as our small agricultural station was once commonly referred to , reminded the Assembly that what the plot needed was some “good male bulls and some good female cows’.

I guess, we all have our moments and the Caribbean knows how to laugh. Afterall, why should the Calypsonians have all the fun? And as I said before “give a politician some facts and he’ll draw his own confusions. It is healthy not to take ourselves too seriously.

So I end where I began. It is an honour and privilege to have you all with us. It is good for us to give back in some way to the CPA which has done a lot and will do much more for us in the years to come and to a new generation of leaders in assisting with the growth of our parliamentary systems and the strengthening of good governance. Although we are not yet and I stress yet equipped with all the sophistication of modern conference facilities that so many of you already possess, I expect you will be comfortable, relaxed and at ease as you ponder and discuss the difficult issues before us. After all Anguilla is good at making people feel at ease and I trust that at the end of the conference you will all borrow

that famous phrase coined by our colleagues from Jamaica in describing Anguilla as “Dey lickle but dey tallawah”

On behalf of the Anguilla Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association it is my honored duty to declare this conference open.

Thank you.

David Carty

(Honourable Speaker of the House of Assembly, Anguilla)