



Parliamentary Workshop

Developing good practice in political representation and constituency work in the Caribbean region

26-27 November 2012, Port-of-Spain (Trinidad and Tobago)

Concept note

20 August 2012

Parliaments and citizens

What is the state of relations between parliaments and citizens in the Caribbean region? How is this relationship evolving? What do citizens expect from their representatives and their parliament? And, crucially, are parliaments delivering on these expectations?

The *Global Parliamentary Report* (www.ipu.org/gpr) provides a bold new analysis of the relationship between citizens and parliaments. Drawing on contributions from parliaments and individual parliamentarians, it examines new and emerging trends, and describes how parliaments are adapting to changing expectations.

The situation is bleak in many parts of the world. Opinion polls suggest that trust in politicians, and the institution of parliament, is low. This has many implications for the quality of democracy. But this picture needs to be nuanced. Many people declare a higher level of trust in their local representative, with whom they are more likely to have direct contact. This trust can be nourished by regular dialogue and exchange of views between citizens and their representatives. It can be weakened by perceptions of broken promises, corruption and remoteness of a political elite.

The *Global Parliamentary Report* analyzes the role of individual parliamentarians, and notably the 'constituency service' aspect of their job. People often see parliamentarians as 'service providers'. Resolving this tension between their local and national roles is a challenge for many parliamentarians. Codes of conduct, Constituency Development Funds, and the evaluation of parliamentarians by civil society organizations are among the other trends highlighted in the report

The report also discusses the evolutions in the way that parliament as an institution is becoming more transparent, accessible and accountable to the people. It examines to what extent parliament is successful in listening to citizens and using their input in parliamentary work.

The analysis of the *Global Parliamentary Report* offers a framework for assessing the relations between parliaments and citizens at regional or national level. Such an assessment should help parliaments to define priorities and means of action for strengthening that relationship.

The parliaments in English-speaking Caribbean countries share many characteristics, in terms of history, culture and politics. Yet, each has its own specificities, and there can be no one-size-fits-all approach. The Workshop provides an opportunity for participants to assess the evolving relationship between parliaments and citizens in the region.

The Inter-Parliamentary Union

The Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) is the international organization of parliaments. 162 national parliaments are members of the IPU. However, only one national parliament in the English-speaking Caribbean, Trinidad and Tobago, is currently a member of the IPU. The Workshop therefore provides an opportunity for parliaments to learn more about the IPU, its

activities and the opportunities for inter-parliamentary cooperation that it offers. The Workshop should enable channels of communication to be established between the IPU and parliaments of the region.

Objectives and structure of the Workshop

The Workshop is designed to help MPs to find practical ways of improving the way they perform their representative role. The structure of the seminar tries to link some of the main findings of the Global Parliamentary Report (GPR) to the practical experiences of politicians. The Workshop will help MPs to understand and manage the expectations of voters in terms of service and delivery, by examining the international evidence in the GPR, and seek to find insights that help MPs do their jobs within the national parliament.

During the Workshop, participants will:

- a) discuss the themes of the Global Parliamentary Report, specifically the practicalities of representation,
- b) share their experiences of political representation and the challenges that they face on a daily basis,
- c) draw lessons from international best practice in this area,
- d) identify strategic approaches to improving representation, and
- e) identify the practical measures that individual MPs and the parliament in that country might seek to implement in the next 6-12 months.

A second objective is to raise awareness of opportunities for inter-parliamentary cooperation through the IPU; to better engage the parliaments of the Caribbean region in efforts to develop a parliamentary dimension to international cooperation.

The Workshop will be facilitated by Mr. Greg Power, author of the *Global Parliamentary Report*, and representatives of the IPU.

The Workshop will be an interactive event. The section devoted to representation has four main parts.

The first session '**Political representation and voter expectations**' will go through some of the main insights from the Global Parliamentary Report in four areas. It will use the results of the survey of MPs' attitudes towards their roles, and what MPs believe voters want from politicians. The survey discovered that although politicians regard legislating as their most important role, they believe that voters think that constituency work is the most important. Perhaps more significantly, when asked what is the biggest hindrance to effective representation the survey found that lack of resources to do constituency work was the most frequent answer. MPs also seem to spend more time on constituency work than any other activity.

The session will then highlight the diversity, volume and difficulty of constituency casework, illustrated by quotes from MPs reproduced in the report. The purpose will be to emphasise to the MPs in the room, that whatever difficulties they face, they are common to many MPs in different countries.

The session will examine both the demand for, and supply of, constituency work. The evidence in the report suggests that the provision of more resources to do constituency work will often simply result in increased expectations from voters.

The session will encourage MPs to think about how they might approach constituency work in a more strategic fashion, emphasising the need to find solutions which move them from specific to strategic ones, from individual to collective and from local to national. These themes will underpin the remaining three sessions during the day.

The second session '**The content of constituency work**' is designed to be more interactive and will draw directly on the experiences of the MPs. The MPs will be invited to speak about the main challenges they face in delivering for constituents, providing examples of problems voters bring to them and describing how they have addressed them. Initially, MPs should be asked simply to list the range of casework, but then to group problems into different categories and think about how these different types of problems might be amenable to different types of solutions.

The session will also look at the amount of time MPs take to deal with different types of casework and the resources needed. Depending on the size of the group and the issues being raised, MPs could be broken into groups of four or five to examine types of casework, and identify the principal difficulties in that particular country.

The third session '**Strategic responses to voter expectations**' will build specifically on the content of session two by looking at strategic solutions. It will use examples from the GPR and have four parts to it.

First, the session will look at how MPs might use local consultation techniques to both understand the concerns of voters and educate them as to the role of the member of parliament.

Second, it will examine the creation of additional resources for constituency offices, constituency service and the establishment of constituency development funds in certain countries.

Third, the session will look at how MPs might find strategic and collective solutions to individuals' problems. It will use examples from the GPR, such as that of the Bangladeshi MP who established a micro-finance union (pp.58-9) or the development of community hospitals in Ghana to encourage MPs to think about how they might address the problems highlighted in session two.

Finally, the MPs will be invited to think about how they might use their constituency expertise as a way of informing policy development and legislation within parliament. This might involve the creation of new mechanisms within parliament to channel that constituency experience into the legislative process or in to government, or it might result in specific recommendations for new legislation or policy to address problems that emerged during the day.

The fourth and last session '**Identifying practical next steps**' will build on the previous sessions by asking the MPs what they will do to improve constituency services and make greater use of this expertise in parliament. The range of options here is very wide. This might include asking parliament for the provision of more resources for constituency offices, the development of a code of practice which defines what is legitimate constituency work, the adoption of new consultation techniques locally, the agreement amongst a group of MPs in a particular region to find collective local solutions to particular problems or the creation of new parliamentary mechanisms to insert constituency expertise into the parliamentary system.

References

- IPU. *Parliament and democracy in the twenty-first century: A guide to good practice* (2006)
- IPU. *Evaluating parliament: A self-assessment toolkit for parliamentarians* (2008)
- IPU and UNDP. *Global Parliamentary Report: The changing nature of parliamentary representation* (2012)
- *IPU Strategy 2012 – 2017: Better parliaments, stronger democracies*