

Working Meeting of Caribbean Presiding Officers on Open Parliament Meeting Summary - April 19, 2021

Objective

This working meeting will aim to contribute to the development of a strategy for ParlAmericas support to member parliaments in the Caribbean, on the implementation of the [Road Map towards Legislative Openness](#), which is currently being updated through a participative process.

Summary of Discussions

Participants identified the following common priorities and challenges:

Common priorities

Issue	Description
<i>Ethics - Code of conduct</i>	The development of a code of conduct, including provisions for conflicts of interests and asset/interest declarations is a priority in Antigua and Barbuda (in progress), Guyana and Trinidad and Tobago. The Bahamas have a code of ethics for ministers and parliamentary secretaries.
<i>Website, ICT Tools & Virtual sittings</i>	Parliamentary websites are a useful tool to share information about members, the legislative process, the status of bills, etc. Many parliaments identified the need to improve their websites to have more up to date information. A need to improve on the use of ICT tools to facilitate citizens' access to information and support virtual sittings was also mentioned. This was stated as a priority in Antigua and Barbuda, Belize, Dominica, Guyana, Suriname and Trinidad and Tobago.
<i>Public engagement and education</i>	The strengthening of public engagement, for example through youth parliaments, debates and outreach has been stated as a priority across the region to improve civic education and understanding about the role of parliament. Creating more opportunities for participation within the legislative process was also mentioned as a strategy to overcome a lack of opposition in parliament and gather a variety of perspectives. This was also noted as a challenge in archipelagos where certain islands have better representation in parliament. It was stated as a priority by The Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Guyana and Saint Lucia.
<i>Strengthening oversight mechanisms</i>	Reinforcing the independence of parliament is needed to strengthen its oversight mechanisms, particularly in situations where the government has a strong majority in parliament. This includes strengthening the work of the public accounts committee in practice and can also include leveraging the potential collaboration with Supreme Audit Institution. It was identified as a priority by Antigua and Barbuda, The Bahamas, Belize, Dominica and Saint Lucia.

Common challenges

Challenge	Description
<i>Independence</i>	The majority of parliaments do not have control over their institutional budget, human resources and other administrative support. As a result, many lack the appropriate resources to undertake the initiatives they would like to promote. Having the ability to invest in strong public servants was noted as a key lesson learned. Looking at external financing, through grants or other sources was proposed as a solution.
<i>Lack of opposition</i>	In many parliaments, the lack of budgetary and administrative independence is combined with a significant one-party majority in parliament which creates challenges for parliamentary oversight. Improving citizen participation opportunities and the scrutiny by the public accounts committee (i.e. by adding civil society representatives on the committee) were noted as opportunities to overcome this challenge.
<i>Lack of political will by members</i>	Some noted a lack of political will or understanding among members of the need to promote an open parliament which creates a barrier to advancing with any such reforms. One solution proposed has been to support the development of a civil society movement to demand this openness by further educating the public about the role of parliament, in order to build that political will.

Next Steps

- The ParlAmericas International Secretariat will create a self-assessment tool to help guide parliaments in determining their national priorities.
- Once self-assessments take place and priorities are identified, a repository of good practices from the region will be distributed by ParlAmericas to serve as a guide for peer exchanges.
- A follow up meeting will then be organized to identify a few key priorities and group parliaments together to develop a strategy for each theme.

Existing initiative:

- Parliaments are encouraged to join the **Caribbean Regional Hub on Technological Innovation** which is hosted by the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago and will act as a space to exchange knowledge on innovation in parliaments, including on/about parliamentary information management systems, good practices and lessons learned. To join, they can submit their IT and/or Communications persons' contact details (cellular phone number, email, job title in parliament, short description of their role) to: Caribbean Hub, caribbeanhub@ttparliament.org; cc: Garreth Ferguson gferguson@ttparliament.org.

Participants

- President the Honourable Alincia Williams Grant, Senate of Antigua and Barbuda
- Speaker the Honourable Halson Moultrie, House of Assembly of The Bahamas
- President the Honourable Mildred Hall-Watson, Senate of The Bahamas
- Vice-President the Honourable Jaunianne Dorsett, Senate of The Bahamas
- Senator the Honourable Ranard Eric Henfield, The Bahamas – Vice-President of ParlAmericas Open Parliament Network for the Caribbean
- Speaker the Honourable Arthur Holder, House of Assembly of Barbados
- President His Honour Reginald Farley, Senate of Barbados
- Speaker the Honourable Valerie Woods, National Assembly of Belize
- President the Honourable Carolyn Trench-Sandiford, Senate of Belize
- Ms. Eunice Gibson, National Assembly of Belize
- Speaker the Honourable Joseph Isaac, House of Assembly of Dominica
- Mr. Andrew Augustine, Clerk of the House of Representatives of Grenada
- Speaker the Honourable Manzoor Nadir, National Assembly of Guyana
- Ms. Carleta Charles, International Relations Clerk of the National Assembly of Guyana
- Ms. Christina Ramroop, Parliament Reporter of the National Assembly of Guyana
- Speaker the Honourable Andy Daniel, House of Assembly of Saint Lucia
- Ms. Lyndell Gustave, Clerk of the House of Assembly of Saint Lucia
- Member of Parliament Patrick Kensenhuis, Suriname
- Member of Parliament Miquella Soemar-Huur, Suriname
- Mr. Steven Ishwardat, International Relations Clerk of the National Assembly of Suriname
- Speaker the Honourable Bridgid Annisette-George, House of Representatives of Trinidad and Tobago – Vice-President of ParlAmericas
- Ms. Lynette Joseph Guevera, International Relations Clerk of the Parliament of Trinidad and Tobago