

PARLIAMENTARY ACCOUNTABILITY AND THE CONTROL OF CORRUPTION

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INTRODUCTION

I am very pleased to be with you on this important occasion. The International Anti-Corruption Conference has become one of the primary tools for developing regional and global co-operation in the fight against corruption. I am particularly pleased that the newly established African Parliamentary Network Against Corruption – APNAC – has been able, with the support of the World Bank and the Parliamentary Centre of Canada, to organise this workshop. Our task is to put the spotlight on a dimension of the anti-corruption struggle that is too often ignored – the role of parliament in strengthening systems of public accountability

The findings of Transparency International, the World Bank and others reveal that corruption is a much more serious problem in some countries than in others. In all countries, corruption is like an infection that can break out at any time and must be guarded against vigilantly. In some countries, corruption is like an advanced cancer that has begun to eat at the bone and the major organs. Systemic corruption of this kind weakens national institutions and makes economic and social progress virtually impossible.

Not so many years ago the international community turned a blind eye to corruption. It was seen as just another price of doing business, a way of greasing the wheels. Fortunately that view is now discredited. While corruption may pay off in a big way for the people who practice and get away with it, their countries and compatriots pay a very high price. For that reason, corruption can be seen as a kind of economic treason – a betrayal of the country's vital interests.

Leadership is essential in the effort to control corruption. Without it, anti-corruption campaigns mysteriously run out of steam and grind to a halt. A few little fish may be caught but the system carries on as before. The commitment of a President or Prime Minister may be seen as a prerequisite for corruption control, a necessary condition, though by itself not enough. Leadership from the top may mean very little unless it is followed by a sustained, co-ordinated effort to strengthen national institutions and policies.

Parliament is one of the key institutions in building a chain of accountability connecting citizens to the state. As described in *Controlling Corruption: the Parliamentarian's Handbook*, "parliaments and parliamentarians have a crucial role to play in setting an example of integrity, and in striving to hold government accountable for its actions." Unfortunately, this is one of those cases where it is easier said than done.

In the Laurentian Seminar, organised jointly by the Parliamentary Centre and the World Bank Institute, parliamentarians from over twenty countries from around the world reported that many of their parliaments were weak, ineffective institutions of accountability. In seeking explanations for this situation, the overall system of governance emerged as the villain. Too many countries are state centred and executive dominated, with legislative and judicial institutions under the thumb of the executive. In these systems, information is guarded jealously and participation in public affairs is neither encouraged nor welcomed. It is for the executive to know and to act, largely unencumbered by other institutions and citizens.

In systems of this kind, parliaments are often denied the means – research services, staff and offices – that would allow them to effectively carry out their responsibilities. Instead, many MPs become glorified municipal councillors, spending much of their time seeking favours from the executive for their constituents. Still others turn their attention to exploiting the office for their own personal gain. Instead of being part of the solution to corruption, parliament itself becomes part of the problem

This is not the whole story, however. Those same parliamentarians from Africa, Asia and Latin America offered many examples of practical actions being taken to strengthen parliaments. Let me cite a few examples:

The Budget Process. Slowly but surely, some parliaments are beginning to strengthen their handling of the budget process by having key committees conduct public consultations in advance of the budget and monitor implementation afterwards. The Finance Committee of the Parliament of Ghana is a good example of a committee with a sustained commitment to playing a larger, more effective role in the budget process.

Oversight Committees. Many parliaments are starting to give priority to strengthening their committee systems as instruments of accountability. Particular attention is being paid to key oversight committees such as public accounts, local government and anti-corruption. The Public Accounts Committee of the Parliament of Uganda, which I have the honour to Chair, has made a useful contribution to the national anti-corruption drive by co-operating closely with other agencies like the Inspector General of Government and the Auditor General.

Building Relations with Civil Society. Some parliaments, notably in South Africa, have shown considerable imagination in promoting dialogue and co-operation with civil society organisations, particularly those working with the poorest citizens. The parliament of Gauteng Province, whose Deputy Speaker is on this panel today, has even established a public outreach office that assists citizens in communicating with their parliamentarians.

None of these examples will transform parliaments overnight. The work of strengthening governance institutions is always slow and often frustrating. Unlike building bridges, you can't see the results before your eyes, but it is essential work nevertheless. The real measure of progress in this area is whether citizens feel their needs are being met. Is parliament seen as an institution that helps to solve real, practical problems in the lives of people or is it just part of the problem? Do parliamentarians actively seek policy solutions to the problems of their constituents or do they stand on the sidelines of governance? Answers to questions like these define the effectiveness of parliament as an instrument of good governance.

APNAC

I would like to say a few words about a useful new tool in the efforts to strengthen parliaments – parliamentary networks. Parliamentarians have been getting together for years in organisations like the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU) and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) but recently we have seen the emergence of a new kind of parliamentary network, one that is policy focused and sustained. Instead of only meeting at an occasional seminar or conference, parliamentarians, facilitated by new communications technology, are beginning to work together to develop national and regional solutions to policy problems.

As it happens, Africa has pioneered in this area with the launch last February of APNAC – the African Parliamentary Network Against Corruption. Some 25 African parliamentarians from 10 countries spent a week together discussing the causes and cures of corruption and, in particular, focussing on what parliament can do to help build national integrity systems. In the course of the week, participants discovered the great value of African parliamentarians coming together to share information, experience and lessons learned. It was felt imperative to build upon the seminar by maintaining contact and reaching out to other parliamentarians and parliamentary organisations throughout Africa. Consequently, APNAC was launched with the following objectives in mind: to build the capacity of member parliaments to exercise accountability; to share information on lessons learned and best practices; to undertake projects to control corruption; and to co-operate with organisations in civil society. As one of its first activities, the Network is presenting this workshop. On Saturday, the Co-ordinating Committee will meet to plan its workplan for the next year.

Quite apart from its value as a learning tool, networking of this kind can be a tremendous boost to parliamentary morale. By seeing what others are doing, you may discover the possibility of doing the same in your own parliament. And by using new communications technology, the cost (financial and otherwise) of bringing people together in face to face meetings can be reduced substantially. Networking is another illustration of the lesson that parliaments, like other institutions, must learn to innovate continuously, or risk being left behind in the governance revolution.