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# Reinforcing Parliamentary Democracy: A Proposal for the Canadian Region of CPA

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*This article proposes that the legislatures of the Canadian Region of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association establish working relationships with legislatures in the Commonwealth Caribbean along the lines of those undertaken between the Australian and the Pacific Regions of CPA. The purpose of the project would be to increase co-operation between Parliaments, including the sharing of ideas and best practices.*



The Canadian Region of CPA consists of ten provincial legislatures, three territorial legislatures and the federal Parliament. The Commonwealth Caribbean includes the following 18 countries some of which are fully independent while others are self governing but not yet independent.

Anguilla	Grenada
Antigua and Barbuda	Guyana
Bahamas	Jamaica
Barbados	Montserrat
Belize	Saint Kitts and Nevis
Bermuda	Saint Lucia
British Virgin Islands	Saint Vincent and the Grenadines
Cayman Islands	Trinidad and Tobago
Dominica	Turks and Caicos

I would like to see each Canadian province “twin” with one (or more) Commonwealth Parliamentary Association branch in the Caribbean, Americas and the Atlantic Region. This “twinning” would follow the pattern set in a 1997 agreement of the Australian Region to twin the Pacific Region Branches.<sup>1</sup>

Informally, all Commonwealth Parliaments already work together through the secretariat and many work together at the parliamentarian, speaker or clerk

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level. This proposal will formalize the Parliament to Parliament relationship, and encourage the sharing of resources, knowledge and experience to a greater degree.

## The Pacific Parliamentary Partnerships Program

Perhaps the best way to explain how this project might work is to look at the Pacific Parliamentary Partnerships Program which currently involves eight Pacific parliaments. It is supported by funding received from AusAID.

The CPA Australian Region secretariat in association with the United Nations Development Programme and twinned Australian parliaments coordinates the program for Cook Islands, Kiribati, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu.

The New South Wales Parliament coordinates the program for Bougainville and Solomon Islands.

As of May 2012 eight separate twinning programs existed:

- Bougainville (twinned with New South Wales)
- Cook Islands (twinned with Western Australia)
- Kiribati (twinned with Australian Capital Territory)
- Samoa (twinned with Tasmania)
- Solomon Islands (twinned with New South Wales)
- Tonga (twinned with South Australia)
- Tuvalu (twinned with Victoria)
- Vanuatu (twinned with Queensland)

Under the terms of this agreement the parliaments agree to actively work towards developing friendly relations through:

- a. Exchanges of information regarding the work of the two parliaments and on matters of common interest;
- b. Training activities between the parliaments that promote parliamentary development;
- c. Exchanges of visits between the two parliaments as a means of fostering links between parliamentarians and parliamentary staff; and
- d. Meetings between representatives of the parliaments at conferences or seminars they may attend.

Each parliament appoints a liaison officer for the purpose of the agreement. Proposals and arrangements for exchanges are mutually agreed and coordinated through the liaison officers. The liaison officers are also responsible for keeping the Pacific and Australian Regional Secretaries of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association informed of developments in relation to the agreement.

Let me give some examples of recent programs:

- A Local Area Network has been installed in Bougainville and is in the process of being activated, with funds from the twinning project used to meet the installation and maintenance costs. The installation is being undertaken by a local company, and the maintenance contract specifically includes a skills transfer component – following the contract period, the IT staff at the New South Wales House of Representatives will have the skills required to continue to maintain and service the LAN.
- The Western Australian Legislative Assembly conducted a parliamentary seminar in the Cook Islands the week of April 9, 2012 focusing on the activation of a Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee. The seminar was attended by 14 current members of parliament, including the Deputy Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and other ministers, the Clerk and Deputy Clerk.
- The Papua New Guinea Parliamentary Librarian visited Kiribati in October/November 2011 to assist with an upgrade of the Kiribati Parliamentary Library.
- An induction program for new parliamentarians in Kiribati was held in November 2011. Mark McRae (former Clerk of the Australian Capital Territory Legislative Assembly) and Mary Toohey (ACT Deputy Parliamentary Counsel) participated in the induction program.
- A Tasmanian Parliament Audio and Computer Systems Specialist, visited Samoa from December 5-7, 2011 to undertake an IT needs assessment for the Assembly. The report from that needs assessment was provided to the Samoan Legislative Assembly and to AusAID to assist with a broader upgrading of the parliament's facilities.
- Dr Richard Herr from the University of Tasmania visited Samoa from April 24-28, 2012 to undertake scoping work for a training course for parliamentary staff that could lead to tertiary accreditation.
- A Samoan Deputy Clerk and a Policy Officer attended a community outreach workshop for Pacific parliamentary staff held at the Australian Parliament from April 30 to May 4, 2012.
- A Human Resources and Strategic Support Manager, in the Solomon Islands completed a two-week secondment to provide him with exposure to the human resources systems and strategic planning mechanisms in place in the New South Wales Parliament. He will be responsible for implementing the new HR policies of the National Parliament.
- In March 2012 a delegation of National Parliament Committee Chairs visited the New South Wales Parliament (as part of an official visit to Australia) and participated in a forum attended by members and staff of the New South Wales Parliament. The forum offered a chance to share the challenges experienced by MPs in the Solomon Islands. The delegation also met with committee chairs and committee staff to discuss practical issues relating to committee operations.
- The Chairman of the Tongan Legislative Assembly's Finance and Public Accounts Committee undertook a study visit to the Australian and South Australian Parliaments in November 2011.
- The Media Manager of the Australian House of Representatives and the Assistant Director of Broadcasting visited Tonga in November 2011 to assist with the development of the Tongan Legislative Assembly's community outreach program, including training for staff and media training for parliamentarians.
- A Tuvalu parliamentary staff member participated in the 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Summer Residency Program for Public Accounts Committees organised by Deakin University at Geelong, Victoria in February 2012.

The Pacific Parliamentary Partnership program is very ambitious and involves Speakers, Clerks, Librarians, Auditors, as well as Ministers and ordinary parliamentarians. It will take many years for Canadian legislatures and Caribbean countries to reach the same level of co-operation. But let us not be daunted by the challenge. Every worthwhile project must start somewhere and with the considerable parliamentary resources available in our federal, provincial, territorial and Caribbean legislatures we can work together and experience the same level of success as the Australian and Pacific Regions.

## Notes

- 1 See the Parliamentary Partnership Agreement between the Parliaments of the Pacific Region and the Australian Region.