



CPA Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures

Self-Assessment Guidance Note

Introduction

Parliaments are constantly being assessed by outsiders – the media, academics, intergovernmental agencies, civil society – and this practice is growing. In 2006, the CPA therefore developed "Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures" so Parliaments and Legislatures can undertake their own self-assessments based on a Commonwealth standard developed by Members and parliamentary officials, a standard specifically designed to help Parliaments identify possible new ways to function as effectively as possible.

CPA Study Group

At the instigation of Members and with the support of its main partners in this work, the World Bank Institute (WBI) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the CPA developed "Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures" in late 2006 to serve as a guide for Parliaments seeking either to find new ways to strengthen their performance perhaps as part of a democratic reform programme, or to determine whether they have kept up with advances in parliamentary practices and procedures. Organizations and agencies providing parliamentary strengthening programmes may also use the Benchmarks in partnership with Parliaments and Legislatures to guide their programming.

The CPA Benchmarks were drafted by a Study Group of CPA Parliamentarians representing different Commonwealth Regions. Building on the *Commonwealth Latimer House Principles* and the recommendations of some 26 different CPA workshops and study groups held over the years, the CPA Study Group on Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures synthesized and codified a set of benchmarks to reflect the current state of good Commonwealth parliamentary practice.

Although the study group sought to synthesize the past work of the CPA, the synthesis was always intended as the beginning of the discussion rather than the end. The study group represented most of the Commonwealth regions, but could not capture all of the nuances and diversity in the 53 Commonwealth countries. The CPA is therefore encouraging individual Parliaments to undertake Benchmarks Self-Assessments and share their experiences with their peers in other Commonwealth Parliaments. It is also holding discussions intended to formulate new Benchmarks which reflect the Commonwealth's regional diversity.

How can these Parliamentary Standards be used?

The following is taken from the introduction of the CPA Study Group report: “A framework that sets out what constitutes effective democratic practice in contemporary Parliaments would help Parliaments measure themselves in their own reform and modernization efforts aimed at making Parliaments more effective and democratic institutions. In addition, benchmarks may also serve as a useful tool for Parliaments working to establish their independence and powers relative to the government.”

A “Benchmarks” self-assessment can lead to discussion and debate – both inside and outside of Parliaments – about their appropriateness and utility in different nations. It is a useful tool around which to formulate a debate. Next, the “Benchmarks” can provide a basis for measuring parliamentary effectiveness, and to help leverage reforms.

What is covered?

The “Benchmarks” are phrased as standards rather than as questions and no system to code/categorize responses to these benchmarks is provided by the document itself. Indicators are divided into four main topical headings: General, Organization of the Legislature, Functions of the Legislature, and Values of the Legislature, and there are additional sub-categories listed within these main headings.

A “Benchmarks” self-assessment is purely for a Parliament to track its progress against an accepted parliamentary standard or perhaps to support a request for external assistance. Such an exercise would also help the CPA to ensure the "Benchmarks" are relevant to the many different ways parliamentary democracy is practiced throughout the Commonwealth.

How to conduct a self-assessment

A "Benchmarks" self-assessment could be conducted by:

- Determining whether your Parliament or Legislature is able to “tick the box” on each of the 87 standards,
- Assessing how well it meets each one, such as by rating it on a scale of 1 to 5 or
- Devising another method of scoring, such as by setting top scores higher in areas you might consider more important than others.

An assessment panel could include: Presiding Officers, government and opposition Members, and Clerks/Secretaries and/or other officials. The panel could have added credibility if it included some respected and knowledgeable external assessors, such as judges, senior civil servants, lawyers, academics or former Members or officials. The external assessors could be asked to agree that they would not make the results of the assessment public without parliamentary approval.

Benchmarks variations

The Commonwealth and the CPA recognize diversity as a strength: different experiences, approaches and attitudes foster variations in practices and policies which stimulate innovation everywhere. This certainly applies to parliamentary democracy where the ways in which parliamentary theories are applied differ throughout the Commonwealth. The CPA recognizes that no single Parliament is a source of “best practice” in all areas, that all Parliaments can be sources of valuable innovations regardless of their size or age and that in fact there are many forms of “best practice”. Furthermore, the parliamentary system is a dynamic one so that “best practice” today will be surpassed tomorrow as institutions, Members, officials and citizens alike seek ever higher standards.

The development of regional versions of the CPA Benchmarks is one way to contribute to the evolution of this valuable set of standards. Regional versions being drafted in each of Asia, southern Africa and the Pacific Islands will identify variations in practices and priorities so Parliaments have Benchmarks truly reflecting the Commonwealth's diversity.