

## The CRF says:

### TIME TO REVISIT THE ROLE OF THE MP

As the countdown to September 7, 2015 continues, one thing we can be sure of seeing more of, is candidates making the rounds of their constituencies, listening to concerns, and making copious promises. While some of these promises are the same as in previous election campaigns, such as basic infrastructural facilities and employment opportunities for the most vulnerable, others have gone beyond the usual.

For example, the UNC candidate for Toco/Sangre Grande is promising his constituents a \$30 - \$40 million football stadium with a seating capacity for 4000 (Guardian, August 2, 2015).

With all the words flying back and forth, is there a common understanding of what the role of the MP should be? And when constituents say that they are disappointed with their last MP's performance, are they clear about what exactly they expect them (MPs) to do?

### Clearer articulation of MP's role needed

In our first public education bulletin on local government reform, the CRF made the point that most of the demands that people make of their MPs should really be the responsibility of the local government body. In fact, reading some of the remarks by candidates and constituents in their interviews with newspaper reporters, one gets the feeling that they are aware that there is a blurring of the lines between the two roles. For example, the PNM candidate for La Horqueta/Talparo laid the blame for the poor services in parts of the constituency, not on the incumbent MP, but on the local government representatives (Newsday, June 14, 2015).

It is time to bring some clarity to this confused situation. This is particularly important now, given the heightened interest in having MPs serve full time. We started the clarifying process in our first public education statement with proposals for enhancing the role and function of local government bodies. As a result, we were also saying that the MP should no longer play a direct role in the provision of basic social, infrastructural and environmental services. So with that out of the way, the CRF would like you to consider a two-part role for the MP: (1) as facilitator in the provision of services to the constituency and (2) as legislator.

### Facilitator in the provision of services to constituency

The proposals below are intended to re-configure, streamline and then expand the duties performed at the constituency level.

- The MP should serve as an ex-officio (non-voting) member of the local government body (or bodies) that fall within his/her constituency. In that capacity he/she can be expected to,
  - Serve as an intermediary between the local body and government ministries.
  - Channel ideas and issues from the lower level to the higher level institutions of state.
  - Provide advice about pertinent legislative, developmental and/or administrative issues that should be taken into consideration in decision-making at the local level. In particular, MPs would want to ensure that there is a National Physical Development Plan in place and that it is actively being used to guide the development agenda nationally, regionally and at the community level.

- Where more large-scale infrastructural works (e.g. building of schools, hospitals, major roads etc.) and more comprehensive socio-economic development programmes (e.g. agricultural development, improvement of utilities) are involved, the MP should assume a more active role in monitoring these undertakings and reporting back to constituents at regular intervals.
- With assistance from the Office of the Parliament and other appropriate national agencies, the MP should provide support for public education programmes aimed at promoting “active citizenship and political literacy” among constituents (UK House of Commons, 2010).

## Legislator

The other aspect of the MP’s role plays out in Parliament. In order to better understand that role, we need to take a closer look at Parliament itself. The Inter-Parliamentary Union, in their publication *Parliament and Democracy in the Twenty-First Century* (2006), provides us with a useful starting point. According to that document, Parliament is the primary institution of democracy of the State and a democratic parliament is representative, transparent in the conduct of its business, accessible to the public, accountable to the electorate, and effective in the manner it functions.

Against that background, let us look at the main functions the MP must perform.

## Scrutiny of bills

The MP is a lawmaker. He/she must carefully examine and critique all bills, whether in the debate or in committee. But this is not always the case. The following assessment about the functioning of the British Parliament could equally apply to ours. It says,

The British system of governance is in need of reform. Weak parliamentary scrutiny of government bills threatens the quality of legislation, thereby leading to poor and unintended outcomes. Moreover, scrutiny of legislation is an integral element of holding the executive to account. Parliament must therefore have the structures and processes in place to effectively perform legislative scrutiny. <http://www.reform.uk/publication/how-to-run-a-country-a-parliament-of-lawmakers/>

We don’t have to go far back to see similarities with our situation. For example in 2012, there was the unexpected early proclamation of Section 34 of the Administration of Justice (Indictable Offences) Bill before Parliamentarians suddenly woke up to realize the full negative impact of having that section of the bill become law.

Regardless of party affiliation, all MPs must make informed and well-researched contributions to parliamentary debates to ensure that only bills of the highest quality are passed.

## Holding the executive accountable

In too many instances Cabinet takes decisions for implementing massive projects that draw on a considerable amount of the nation’s resources with little or no attempt to open up the proposal to the scrutiny of Parliament. This country has witnessed this kind of unilateral action far too often. One example of this is the Invaders’ Bay Project where Government appears to have authorised the leasing of land for development works in breach of the Central Tenders Board Act.

On the campaign trail, we are hearing a lot of talk about a mass transit system, aka rapid rail, and about an expansion of the free laptop programme across all levels of the school system. Both of these would require considerable resources whether directly from the state’s coffers or through loans. MPs,

regardless of party affiliation, must be on the alert and demand that they have their say on these matters.

### *Accounting to the electorate*

Some may argue that trying to control Cabinet is virtually impossible for most ordinary MPs: if you belong to the majority party, then you are expected to tow the party line; if you belong to the opposition, your side does not have the required amount of votes to defeat the government. But the effect of this situation can be minimised if we take this final aspect of the MP's role into consideration.

MPs' parliamentary role must extend outside the walls of Parliament into the constituency. Using all appropriate communication modes/technologies, MPs must implement a system to engage with constituents on an ongoing basis on matters related to their legislative duties. They must be required to explain and seek feedback on bills being debated in the House. Channels must also be available for constituents to bring matters to the attention of the MP that, in their opinion, should be addressed in Parliament.

### **Constitutional provisions**

In light of the foregoing, the CRF is saying that the following should be enshrined in the Constitution:

- MPs must function on a full-time basis and be provided with adequate human, material and financial resources to carry out duties both within Parliament and in the constituency.
- MPs must not function as ministers.
- MPs must be subject to the right of recall.

### **References**

Inter-Parliamentary Union (2006). *Parliament and Democracy in the twenty-first century: a guide to good practice*.

House of Commons (2010). *Speakers' Conference (on Parliamentary Representation)*.

<http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/spconf/239/239i.pdf>

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