

The O.E.C.S. Parliamentary Assembly Facilitating Regional Integration

The inauguration of the OECS Parliamentary Assembly on August 10, 2012 will be a landmark in the establishment of integration arrangements in the Caribbean. The parliamentary assembly will consolidate the government arrangements of the OECS, as embodied in the Treaty of Basseterre, and particularly, in the new thrust for sustained economic development as envisaged in the revised treaty.

Parliaments are the epitome of liberal democracy which is one of the outstanding features of our systems of government and governance in the OECS. Like all of the countries of the English speaking Caribbean, the right to vote in the OECS began with adult suffrage in the post World War II period. The OECS has displayed an enviable record of liberal democracy with free and fair elections in which disputes have been arbitrated and adjudicated by the courts.

In addition, the losers in these electoral contests have neither been shot nor exiled. The people have also been able to exercise their rights to free speech, assembly, worship, and association, without fear of opposition.

It is in this light that the establishment of the parliamentary assembly is so important as we deepen our integration initiatives. The role of the parliament is to give the people's representatives, of all persuasions, a chance to reflect and pronounce on the issues which affect the welfare of their constituents and the nation as a whole. This has been the weak spot of the process to date in the region, where only the government and regional and national officials were privy to the discussions on integration.



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Political parties in the seat of government supported the process but, when in opposition and not being a part of the process, could say with some justification that they did not have enough information to make judgments on decisions which were being taken. The implications of having a parliamentary assembly will be that the business of integration will become more public. The benefits for the people of the region will have to be more clearly articulated after discussions, not only in the assembly, but also by the various stakeholders in the OECS community, whether they are the private sector, the trade unions, civil society, teachers, police, nurses, professionals or ordinary citizens.

A critical feature of the assembly will be its composition. It will be comprised of elected members of local parliaments who have direct mandates from their constituencies. These delegates must include both the prime ministers and the leaders of the opposition.

This is important following the experience of the West Indies Federation, when most of the leaders did not participate at the federal level, thus denying the appropriate status to the arrangement which, in my view, had an impact on its eventual failure.

Two vital points must be made with respect to the assembly to give the present exercise some context. The first point relates to the importance of a parliament in providing an institutional framework for debating the issues of today and equally, or even more importantly, those of tomorrow. The parliamentarian has a critical role in our society being involved in the making of laws that provide finance for the construction of schools and hospitals, determine the taxes to be paid (no taxation without representation), or send persons to jail for crimes committed against other persons or property.



The parliamentarian, to carry out these functions effectively must be properly prepared, and must therefore have the requisite research facilities and access to information. In recognition of this it is not surprising that one of the most celebrated libraries is the Library of Congress in the United States of America.

The second point recognizes that this is the age of high technology and, given the difficulty of moving the parliamentarians from island to island, the region can have the first electronic parliament in the world by using video technology to convene the assembly. Given the challenges of the times in the global economy which have had a marked effect on our own economies, member countries have, through the OECS Economic Union, a rare opportunity to change the development paradigm and to experiment with new forms of government and governance which would be more conducive to the development needs and aspirations of our people.

With the establishment of the assembly we would have in the OECS a new structure of the state with an executive the Authority which also has some delegated legislative powers, a regional assembly - a legislative body, and a regional judiciary. With parallel institutions at the national level, there would be a dual system of government and governance in the OECS.

The Economic Union Treaty provides a framework for the political direction and management of the development process and a framework for economic management

of the newly created single economic and financial space.

The complexity of the new economic arrangements at the global level and the need to engage our citizens at the level of the producers of goods and services to be exported to the international marketplace, require a new approach to economic policy and planning. This approach must have consensus across the widest spectrum of our societies. The assembly is well placed to play a critical role in this process. It would indeed be useful if the assembly could be so constituted to take testimony from, for example, the chairman of the Authority at the beginning and end of his or her term of office, and similarly, in the case of the chairman of the Monetary Council. In addition, on specific matters, for example, health, education, energy, transportation, tourism, agriculture and information technology, the assembly could receive special testimony from experts in the subject area. This would provide another critical outlet for serious discussions on major problems of the day.

In response to the global crisis and the fundamental structural problems which the countries face, the OECS governments have put forward two critical instruments - the OECS Economic Union and the Eight Point Stabilisation and Growth Programme. Both of these are not ends in themselves but the means towards the achievement of sustainable economic development and a higher standard of living and quality of life for the people of the region. The great importance of the assembly is that it gives us an institution which can monitor and contribute to, what must be, a continuous debate on the issues which affect both our current and future citizens.

