

## **PARLIAMENT AND THE PUBLIC**

A mutually beneficial relationship between Parliament and the general public is of utmost importance in any democracy. The Legislature, as Parliament is also known, conducts its business fully cognisant of the fact that every Act they pass or any decision they make as the August House, will have a direct bearing on the lives of the members of the public. Similarly, the general public cast their votes during Parliamentary elections fully aware that their vote will contribute to the outlook of the Legislature, that is, the quality of legislators. Naturally, therefore, a symbiotic relationship between Parliament and the public is born.

## **PARLIAMENTARY REFORMS**

The Parliamentary Reforms that were instituted by Parliament in 1999 revealed that the ideal symbiotic relationship alluded to earlier on was almost non-existent as a result of the remoteness of Parliament to the general citizenry. It was discovered that people were not aware of what Parliament is, what it stands for, what its functions are and most importantly, how its activities impact on their everyday lives.

Subsequently, recommendations were made to improve the rapport between Parliament and the public. The recommendations aimed at making Parliament more visible to the public. This would be made

possible, it was envisaged, by opening up Parliament to the public through, among other things; opening up Committee Meetings to the public, the setting up of Parliament Constituency Information Centres, embarking on outreach programmes, encouraging the public to attend Parliamentary sessions and also to showcase Parliament at any possible for a, even at Provincial Agricultural Shows.

Parliament has made strides in implementing the reforms and the results have been encouraging as there is increased interest in Parliamentary activities from the public. The public is getting increasingly eager to get involved in the Legislative process and other activities of Parliament. The public, or electorate, is getting more enlightened on Parliamentary issues and this is healthy, as subsequently we will get better Legislators, elected into power by an enlightened electorate.

### **PORTFOLIO COMMITTEES AND PUBLIC HEARINGS**

Members of the public are increasingly expressing willingness to input into the legislative process. Some Parliamentary Portfolio Committees hold Public Hearings after a Bill relevant to their committee has been gazzetted to solicit public views on the Bill. The hearings are held either at Parliament or the Committee travels to provinces. The Committees extend invitations to interested persons and individuals to come and input into a particular issue under

investigation or Bill under consideration. I wish to emphasise that the investigations and hearings are open to the public and specifically meant to afford the public a chance to input into a particular issue. Deliberations by the Committees on the information gathered thereto are however not open to the public. The response from the public has been overwhelming, with a lot of people willing to contribute to issues that affect their livelihood.

### **PARLIAMENT CONSTITUENCY INFORMATION CENTRES (PCICs)**

The setting up of Parliament Constituency Information Centres (PCICs) is another avenue of facilitating dialogue between Parliament and the public. The PCICs are offices for Members of Parliament that are being set up in the 120 constituencies and these afford the public the opportunity to interface with their respective MPs and also get to know what will be transpiring at Parliament. The public also can take their concerns to the MP who will in turn take them to Parliament for debate. This way, Parliament is establishing effective and efficient communication channels between itself and the public.

### **OUTREACH PROGRAMMES AND PARLIAMENTARY STUDIES**

Also, in its endeavours to engage and enlighten the public, Parliament embarked on a Schools Outreach Programme. Officers of

Parliament visit 'A' level schools country-wide and lecture to 'A' level students on the functions of Parliament, how laws are made and the Parliamentary Committee System. Parliament targeted the 'A' level students as these are the vanguard of society, and also because, as young adults, they will be eligible to vote as soon as they "enter into the world". Strides have also been made in introducing Parliamentary studies in institutions of learning. Parliamentary studies have already been introduced at tertiary level where college students now learn about Parliament and its activities and also, how they can be involved in those activities. Parliament is still meeting with officials from the Curriculum Development Unit (C.D.U.) with a view to incorporating Parliamentary studies in the secondary school curriculum.

## **EXHIBITIONS**

However, Parliament does not confine its educational campaign to students. It exhibits at Z. I. T. F., the Harare Agricultural Show and Provincial Agricultural Shows where officers take literature on Parliament and give out to members of the public who visit the stand. The public also gets to ask any questions on Parliament and the officers who man the stand will make any clarifications to nagging questions that the public might have.

## **TOURS OF PARLIAMENT**

Tours of Parliament are another way in which Parliament can get to engage the public. Individuals and institutions can book for tours of Parliament with our Public Relations Office or they can just walk in and request for a tour of the building. The PR Department also invites different institutions of learning to visit Parliament so that they are shown and taught about Parliament and its activities.

## **PARLIAMENT AND THE MEDIA**

The PR Department also engages the public through the media. The media is a significant constituent in facilitating dialogue between Parliament and the public. The Public Relations Department liaises with the media so that the media covers Parliament's activities. Parliament also holds workshops with the media and tries to map ways for the correct portrayal of the image of Parliament by the press. The P.R. department also prepares news releases and sends them to the press for publication. All this is done for the benefit of the public, which has to be kept informed on Parliament's activities so that there is transparency on the activities of Parliament and its visibility is thus ensured.

## **PUBLICATIONS**

The Public Relations department also researches and produces publications on Parliament and its activities. The publications include topics on the functions of Parliament, how laws are made, the budget system, the chief whip, the committee system and many other issues. The department also produces a quarterly bulletin, a handbook on Parliament, a book on the history of Parliament and calendars for distribution to the public.

## **ENGAGEMENT WITH CIVIL SOCIETY**

Parliament engages the public through holding meetings, workshops and seminars with civil society. Different civic organisations representing different members of our society engage the Legislature on various issues where they seek to lobby the Parliamentarians for the enhancement of their ideas. Any organization in the country, as long as it operates within the confines of the Zimbabwean law, is free to approach Parliament and lobby the Parliament on issues of interest to them and the section of society that they represent.

## **PUBLIC ENQUIRIES**

The public is also free to phone Parliament and make enquiries on any issues pertaining to Parliament or governance. Their queries will

be directed to the Public Relations department is responsible for information dissemination. The department also responds to written enquiries from members of the public who are free to write in and seek enlightenment and assistance on anything on Parliament.

By and large, the Reforms of 1999 have enhanced the establishment and maintenance of goodwill between Parliament and the public. The foundation has been laid for Parliament to be answerable to the public which it serves and the public itself is becoming increasingly aware of its duties regarding Parliamentary activities. This has helped in fostering Parliamentary democracy.

Parliament & public