

Senate President Hamel-Smith: Corruption affects all of us

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Parliamentarians can play a crucial role in combating money laundering through their influence on legislation by vigorous oversight of government activities and support of parliamentary auditors and through personal leadership, urged Senate President Timothy Hamel-Smith. Hamel-Smith was the feature speaker at the launch of a regional chapter of the Global Organization of Parliamentarians Against Corruption (GOPAC) held at Parliament on Thursday.



GOPAC's executive director Akaash Maharaj

Also in attendance were Speaker Wade Mark, British High Commissioner Arthur Snell, Canadian High Commissioner Gerard Latulippe and GOPAC's executive director Akaash Maharaj. Hamel-Smith said corruption has a transnational footprint as in the case of money laundering and corrupt practices were not simply about the lack of ethics or honesty of public officers. "For example, corruption acts as an unofficial tax on the population and those least able to pay suffer the most.

"Corruption can compromise the region's ability to diversify its economies. Bribery in addition to additional business cost are a burden to small entrepreneurs and misallocates the countries human capital talent," Hamel-Smith said. Corruption, he said, distorted the spending of a

government by focusing spending on activities likely to yield large bribes in a country's procurement systems.

Saying the control of corruption called for a multifaceted strategy, the Senate president said this involved a combination of proper public administration and financial management reform that examined the internal entities of a political system. Accountability, which Hamel-Smith said, was another important element, flourished when there was a healthy balance of power among the State, civil society, the marketplace and the international arena.

"No single institution is in absolute control. The ecology of governance could become unbalanced if it is state-centred and dominated by the executive." Hamel-Smith said transparency existed when accurate information was available in a timely manner. Although a freedom of information act existed in some countries, Hamel-Smith said there were still complaints about the tardy delivery of such information.

"With the lack of transparency, government and opposition engage in rhetorical battles and the members of Parliament can become more like local government councillors, for example, spending much of their time in ensuring local roads are paved, box drains installed and flooding alleviated." Participation in governance, he said, was crucial to democracy and citizens should be provided with a fair opportunity to be engaged to an appropriate degree in governance regardless of class, gender or ethnicity.

"These three governance principles together are interrelated and cannot exist independently of each other. Hence, all parliaments have a responsibility to promote these systems of good governance and their characteristics. "In T&T, with the past regime, there have been calls for constitutional reviews, presumably part of the efforts to strengthen government institutions. In many cases, these reviews showcase attempts to rebalance power between the legislature and the executive.

"We have heard many times that sitting parliamentarians should not form part of the executive. The major reason for requiring this division between the executive and legislature is that good governance requires accountability, which demands the executive be held accountable by all legislators," Hamel-Smith said. He said many times joint-select committees could neither hold meetings nor attract a quorum, since ministers were often engaged in the business of the executive.

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