A SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE LEADER OF GOVERNMENT BUSINESS, H.E. THE HON. MOODY AWORI, EGH, MP, DURING THE OPENING CEREMONY OF THE CONFERENCE ON PARLIAMENTS' INFORMATION MANAGEMENT IN AFRICA: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES OF ICTs TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY AND PARLIAMENTARY GOVERNANCE, AT SAFARI PARK HOTEL - 9TH TO 11TH FEBRUARY, 2005

The Hon. K.F.X. Kaparo, Speaker of the KNA,

Hon. Speakers,

Hon. Members of Parliament,

Representatives of Development Partners,

Distinguished Delegates,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like, first of all, to welcome all the delegates to Kenya and urge them to feel at home. I want to assure them that their presence on our soil is very welcome and we would like them to enjoy every moment of their stay with us.

Mr. Chairman,

May I, in particular, commend the Speakers of the various National and Regional Assemblies who preferred to skip some equally demanding assignments in their offices to come to Nairobi and attend this Conference. This only emphasizes the unique importance put on this Conference at the highest level in each Parliamentary jurisdiction here represented.

This Conference could not have been held at a more opportune time. At independence, we in Africa saw development in terms of dam and road

construction, the building of schools and hospitals, investments in agriculture and industry and expanding of opportunities for commerce and trade. Today, increased enrollment in schools, colleges and universities and enhanced incomes earned by farmers and workers, for instance, have been recognised as good indicators of development African countries have made since they attained independence.

While we were busy doing all this commendable work, the role of the State expanded and consumed whatever little space there was for the individual citizen. The State became the provider and giver of everything. The individual became so small that all the Government expected him to do was to receive the services it provided without any criticism as criticism was equated with rebellion, dishonesty, unpatriotism and disrespect to authority.

In short, political dissent was criminalized as one country after another in Africa became a *de jure* one party state. State investment in developing capacity for Parliament to enable the legislators probe the Executive and defend the rights and dignity of the people and vent public grievances became taboo. Parliaments became mere rubberstamps in the hands of the Executive to do as directed. They were a necessary evil which were to be kept under strong and firm Executive thumb. This is how the decline in the management of our Parliamentary institutions across the continent emerged.

The result was massive human rights abuse demonstrated by detention of Government critics without trial, police brutality including torture against anybody perceived to be an enemy of the State and suppression of any type of freedom of expression, assembly and thought. Misuse of public resources, open and pilferage of public property and unhindered embezzlement of public funds became routine.

What finally followed was rampant poverty and in some cases, the collapse of the State itself.

Mr. Chairman,

I have dwelt on our sad past so as to remind ourselves why we had to change step. We must uphold the rule of law and be faithful to the Constitutions we swore to observe in governing our people. Our people need justice, which is a prerequisite to development.

Let us remind ourselves that every democratic society has to have the three arms of Government functioning in tandem in order to serve the people. We must not therefore feel shy to utilize the scarce public resources to develop the legislative arm of Government to have the required capacity it ought to have in order to discharge its constitutional obligation which is to hold the Government to account by effectively representing the people.

For a Member of Parliament to effectively represent his people, he requires facilities to assist him in the legislative process to ensure that laws passed by Parliament do not end up undermining the dignity of the people and their development in any way. Most of these facilities will be accessed by applying the use of ICT. Modern life is both dynamic and at times chaotic. Bills introduced by the Government tend to be very technical whether it is on trade, finance, education, technology, environment or on agriculture, water, and so on. When a Parliamentary Committee invites a Minister to appear before it to discuss a Bill, the Minister is usually accompanied by a battery of experts on the subject of discussion. This imbalance in the technical support for Members in debating Bills

is a matter of great concern to every country that is keen on strengthening democracy and parliamentary governance.

In many cases, a Member of Parliament is miles away from the seat of Parliament. He may wish to file a Question to a Minister or even just carry out consultation with a Minister or a senior Government official. Members normally do all this on behalf of their electorate because they are elected to represent the people. They form the vital link between the people and the Government. For all these reasons, a Member needs to be well informed and requires to have access to quick reference materials in order to perform his or her duty effectively.

The instant need for information is therefore essential for any Member of Parliament. A computer literate Member will access information of various types using the Internet. Through e-mail, a Member will receive letters and respond to them in real time.

The administration in Parliament could improve effective service delivery to Members through the use and application of ICTs. Members who file their Parliamentary Questions on-line, access the items of agenda to be deliberated during a particular sitting, and all this will allow a Member to have more time at his disposal to undertake other tasks.

Mr. Chairman,

I would like to commend the Italian Government and Chamber of Deputies for having conceived this project of installing ICTs in eight African Parliaments by providing funding through the auspices of the United Nations Department of

Economic and Social Affairs to implement the project. I would like to commend them further for having chosen Nairobi as the centre for coordinating this project, hence the rationale for holding the Conference here. I am reliably informed that the other eight Parliaments including Kenya are Angola, Ghana, Cameroon, Tanzania, Rwanda, Uganda and Mozambique, all of whom are represented here.

Mr. Chairman,

There is no doubt in my mind that we cannot be serious about strengthening democracy and Parliamentary governance if we do not put information management at the centre of modernization of our Parliamentary institutions. This is going to cost money which we must be prepared to frugally spend and at the same time explain to our people the benefits they will derive from such expenditure. We can ill-afford to run a modern Parliament as a private club for a privileged few. Parliament is run using public funds and we must go out of our way to open its management for public scrutiny.

The Bills and Motions we debate in Parliament, the Questions asked by the Members and the Answers that Ministers give must all be available to the public in real time. We must also remain accessible to the public to respond to their questions and concerns. This is the basis of representation and there are no two ways about. Leaders must remain close to their people.

My humble submission is that we cannot attain these noble objectives without deploying the use of ICTs in the management of our Parliamentary institutions. Members of Parliament have two basic roles: To represent their people and to make laws. The application of modern information management tools is capable

of assisting Members to discharge these two roles effectively and efficiently and thus lead to the strengthening of democracy and Parliamentary governance.

Mr. Chairman,

May I conclude by making the following cautionary remarks. It is noteworthy that even in the most developed economies, ICT services are not used to their fullest possible extent as Governments all over the world tend to be conservative in availing themselves of these services. Although the use and application of ICTs tend to increase our capacity to manage information, create knowledge and expand participatory democracy, we must be abundantly aware of the risks and costs associated with it.

For example, it does not matter how democratic we want to be, there must be the protection and right to privacy for every citizen. The application of ICTs definitely reduces costs of running Governments; it increases efficiency, transparency and greater access to public utilities and services; it promotes innovation as access to information is enormous. Most importantly, the application of ICTs in running Government functions makes people to be regarded as customers of Government. Thus the revolution in service delivery both to Members and to the public will occur in our Parliaments if we adopt appropriate information management systems.

Nevertheless, the Government cannot merely put technology into its operations and take it that service delivery, access to information and transparency will automatically improve. Far from it. We must develop the culture of being efficient, effective, accountable, transparent and accessible to the public. The application of ICTs *per se* will not make us achieve these objectives if the

objectives are not ingrained in our basic culture for public service and philosophy of Government and the manner in which we will manage our Parliamentary institutions. In other words, the agenda for reform must be a deliberate political choice to empower our people so that we may increase their say in the way they are represented in Parliament in particular and the manner in which they are governed in general.

Mr. Chairman,

With these few remarks, I wish to declare this Conference officially open.

The Hon. M.A. Awori, EBS, MP
Vice President and Minister for Home Affairs

Office of the Leader of
Government Business
Parliament Buildings
NAIROBI

10th February, 2005