

OPINION & INSIGHTS

Saint Lucia needs a more activist and transparent parliament

AS I SEE IT



By Rahym R.
Augustin-Joseph



There is a growing, if quiet, demand for reforming Saint Lucia's Parliament to strengthen its role in holding the government accountable. Yet, true checks and balances remain elusive under our current system, where those in power are also tasked with scrutinising themselves, which is akin to the police policing the police. This inherent conflict undermines public trust and perpetuates a culture of opacity, where decisions are made without meaningful challenge.

As Shakespeare noted in **Julius Caesar**, "The eye cannot see itself." The only real check comes every five years at the ballot box. But even without abandoning the Westminster model, as proposed (and rejected) in the 2011 Constitutional Reform Report, there are still meaningful reforms that could enhance accountability, transparency and good governance. The stagnation of parliamentary oversight is not just a procedural failure, it is a democratic deficit that leaves citizens without recourse between elections.

The first step of electoral reform

The most urgent change should be replacing the first-past-the-post system with proportional representation. The current model distorts the national will, favouring strong governments while marginalising opposition and minority voices—evident in 1997 and today. Under FPTP, a party with a minority of votes can secure a supermajority of seats, rendering Parliament a mere extension of executive dominance rather than a deliberative body. Tradition and political self-interest have long overridden fairness, but this must change. A proportional system would not only reflect the electorate's true preferences but also incentivise coalition-building and consensus

governance, reducing the winner-takes-all polarisation that stifles dissent.

Strengthening parliamentary oversight

Prime Minister's Questions (PMQs): Adopting structured PMQs, as in the UK, would ensure direct, regular scrutiny of the Prime Minister by opposition and backbench MPs. This would curb evasion through friendly media and force transparency on key national issues. Imagine monthly PMQs where the Prime Minister must defend controversial policies under direct, unscripted questioning. Such a forum would elevate public discourse and deter unilateral decision-making. Given the opposition's structural weakness under our electoral system, civil society representatives could also be included in these sessions, ensuring broader societal participation.

Scrutiny of Public Servants: Parliament should have the power to question senior public servants, whose decisions often impact citizens without sufficient accountability. The outcry has been that at times public servants have power without responsibility, such that their decision-making affects a wide cross-section of the population without any safeguards, bar difficult disciplinary processes to enforce accountability before the public service commissions. The goal isn't to embarrass but to illuminate their work for public and parliamentary review. Accountability hearings would also professionalise the civil service, as officials would know their decisions are subject to scrutiny.

Limiting Executive Appointments: The Prime Minister's unchecked power to appoint key officials must be curtailed. US Senate-style confirmation hearings, though imperfect, could ensure appointees' qualifications and philosophies are publicly

examined, shifting focus from personalities to institutional processes. For example, the appointment of a controversial police commissioner or director of audit should require parliamentary approval, with hearings aired live. Our politics must over time resile from being obsessed with personalities and include processes and institutions, such that the appointees' work ethic, underlying philosophies and plans are on display for critical scrutiny.

Modernising parliament's tools

Technology is woefully underutilised. While live broadcasts of parliamentary sessions exist, basic resources, like a functioning website with bills, committee reports, and Hansard records, are missing. How can citizens engage with laws being debated if they can't access draft legislation? How can journalists fact-check ministerial claims without archived debates? Transparency shouldn't be a privilege for academics but a right for all citizens. A digitised Parliament would also enable e-petitions, virtual public hearings and real-time feedback mechanisms, bridging the gap between representatives and constituents.

Low-hanging fruit

Standing Orders (Section 14): This allows MPs to question ministers on their portfolios. The opposition should use this instead of relying on weekly public briefings, even if concerns about the Speaker persist. If the Speaker consistently blocks valid inquiries, public pressure, not resignation, should force reform.

Public Consultations: The legislative process must include genuine public

input, with clear definitions, as in Guyana's Constitution, ensuring stakeholders have time and opportunity to contribute. But people must also utilise some of the powers in the standing orders, such as petitioning Parliament on matters of national interest.

Reviving the Public Accounts Committee (PAC): The PAC, meant to audit government spending, has been dormant. Consider this: When was the last time a ministry's wasteful expenditure was exposed and rectified through PAC hearings? Small parliaments and government majorities hinder its effectiveness, but solutions exist: expanding membership to include civil society or opposition senators could restore its role.

Conclusion

Reforming Parliament isn't an all-or-nothing endeavour. Incremental changes, such as electoral reform, stronger oversight and modern transparency measures, can significantly improve governance. The cost of inaction is a Parliament that rubber-stamps rather than challenges, and a public increasingly disillusioned with democracy itself. As our democracy matures, we must act to ensure Parliament fulfils its duty: not as a rubber stamp, but as a true check on power. The need for loud, persistent reform is now.

Rahym R. Augustin-Joseph is a 24-year-old Saint Lucian pursuing his Bachelor of Laws at UWI Cave Hill, after earning first-class honours in political science and law. The current Commonwealth Caribbean Rhodes Scholar and a former UWI valedictorian, he is dedicated to using law and politics to transform Saint Lucia and the wider Caribbean.