Commonwealth Pacific nations have all adopted systems of democratic governance based on Western models, and essentially inherited from the colonial era. These forms of government are themselves founded on principles of liberal western democracy, which evolved over a lengthy period, to meet the particular requirements of the colonial power. In the case of the United Kingdom, the devolution of authority from absolute monarchy to a parliament representative of the people paralleled the decline of feudalism, industrialisation and the emergence of the middle classes. The Westminster system of government, with its checks and balances, and division of executive, legislative and judicial arms, essentially reflects British society, culture and values. The model has been found to be transferable to other societies which share similar traditions and values, but it is not necessarily suited in situations where this is not the case.

Similarly, colonial powers tended to transfer to their colonies the European concept of the nation-state, itself the product of centuries of evolution in a peculiarly European setting and based largely on ethnic and cultural and historic homogeneity within well-defined boundaries. Such a state could constitute a convenient administrative unit, but problems of governance would arise if not all of the prerequisites were present – for instance ethnic divisions within natural boundaries have placed strains on a number of newly created states throughout the world.

The Pacific region is experiencing its share of difficulties in attempting to deal with such issues as economic development, modernisation and globalisation from these inherited foundations. In recent years, especially in Melanesia, the fabric of democratic governance and the boundaries of the state have both been strained to breaking point – as shown by the military coups in Fiji, the Bougainville crisis in Papua New Guinea and the ethnic upheaval in Solomon Islands. In parts of Polynesia, Western democratic values have not been applied where they clash with traditional modes of rule.
It is timely therefore to examine the limitations on western democracy in the Pacific region, with a view to considering what (if any) adjustments that be applied to create a more suitable model, in conformity with regional characteristics. Given the variety of societies and cultures within the Pacific, there might be a range of possible variations which could be applied. The sort of factor which may be taken as exerting a relevant influence on democratic governance would include: the role of traditional leadership or communal practices in conflict resolution; systems of land ownership and usage; and ethnic and cultural barriers to national identity.

The end objective of considering these issues is to identify ways in which current problems deriving from such factors may be approached. A number of Resource Persons have prepared in-depth papers which will assist participants in their deliberations. By bringing together a range of political activists, from opposition and governing parties alike, it is hoped that there may be frank and open discussion of the issues. The role of the Preparatory Meeting is to conduct an in-depth analysis, drawing on the many and varied talents of the participants, and to produce a clear and concise document to aide the Pacific leaders in their informal discussions which follow.

The Commonwealth Secretariat seeks to play the role of catalyst in creating the framework in which the meetings take place. By its nature the Commonwealth is an organisation where shared values and traditions apply, and which upholds the basic principles of democracy and human rights to which its members all subscribe. The Secretariat also recognises the need to deal squarely with the issues troubling its Pacific members in the field of democratic governance, and stands ready to assist wherever possible in applying measures which might be identified by the Roundtable.