

QUEENSLAND BRANCH



Commonwealth Parliamentary Association UK 71st Annual Westminster Conference on Effective Parliaments Travel Report

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Introduction:

One Voice, Many Songs

To close the conference of the 71st Westminster Conference on Effective Parliaments, Hon Konris Maynard, National Assembly of St Kitts and Nevis, Leader of Government Business, Minister for Public Infrastructure, Energy, and Utilities, Domestic Transport, Communication and Technology and Post performed a song.

Hon Maynard has been named four times as the Calypso King of St Kitts Nevis. He sang a song entitled "One Voice, Many Songs". It exhorted listeners to appreciate their diversity but to look at diversity as a potential strength if people choose to work together like the many different voices in a choir.

This song captured the spirit of the week. While the conference participants represented incredibly diverse polities, all shared a common language created by the Westminster system of Governance.

Background:

The 71st Westminster Conference on effective parliaments drew together 67 delegates from 25 countries, 2 British Overseas Territories and 1 devolved parliament.

Delegates were both elected or democratically appointed legislative representatives and Parliamentary Officials.

Government, Opposition, third parties and independents were among the delegates and roles included Speakers, Deputy Speakers, Ministers, Shadow Ministers and various other Parliamentary roles.

These Seminars commenced after World War II as Britain was still in a rebuilding phase and many former colonies were moving to independence and nation hood. The majority of nations continued to utilize the Westminster System of Governance.

Since the inception, these conferences have provided opportunities for MPs to gain knowledge and skills to improve their individual practice and the practice of the parliaments.

While there is a formal educational program that covers a range of parliamentary practices and issues, the informal discussions and relationships that occur between delegates provide an amazing opportunity to consider parliamentary practice of other practitioners.

CPA Activity

Day 1

Commonwealth Day Celebrations

Delegates participated in various Commonwealth Day Celebrations including a Flag Raising Ceremony and a Commonwealth Day Reception at Westminster. The Reception was addressed by Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP, Speaker of the House of Commons.

Later in the day, delegates attended the Commonwealth Service attended by HRH King Charles III and various other members of the Royal Family.

There was a common theme running through the speeches of the Speaker and His Royal Highness, relating to the massive potential of the Commonwealth with the diversity but common language of Governance being major strengths.

Both spoke of the common issues facing the global community and the contribution that the Commonwealth can make towards solving these issues. Climate change, human trafficking/modern slavery, cybersecurity, health issues and global conflicts in Ukraine, Syria and Yemen, were all identified. The Commonwealth has a particular role to play in promoting democracy.

The Speaker and His Royal Highness noted that the very high number of people in the Commonwealth are under the age of 30 and the need to engage younger people in democratic processes, leadership and social change.

An Extract from the King's Address:

This week marks the tenth anniversary of the Charter of the Commonwealth, which gives expression to our defining values – peace and justice; tolerance, respect and solidarity; care for our environment, and for the most vulnerable among us.

These are not simply ideals. In each lies an imperative to act, and to make a practical difference in the lives of the 2.6 billion people who call the Commonwealth home.

Whether on climate change and biodiversity loss, youth opportunity and education, global health, or economic co-operation, the Commonwealth can play an indispensable role in the most pressing issues of our time. Ours is an association not just of shared values, but of common purpose and joint action.

In this we are blessed with the ingenuity and imagination of a third of the world's population, including one and a half billion people under the age of thirty. Our shared humanity contains an immensely precious diversity of thought, culture, tradition and experience. By listening to each other, we will find so many of the solutions that we seek.

The myriad connections between our nations have sustained and enriched us for more than seven decades. Our commitment to peace, progress and opportunity will sustain us for many more.

Let ours be a Commonwealth that not only stands together, but strives together, in restless and practical pursuit of the global common good.

Keynote Address:

Rt Hon Dame Maria Miller, Member for Basingstoke, Chair of CPA UK Executive Committee

First elected in 2005, Dame Miller came to Parliament following a 20-year corporate career in advertising, marketing and business leadership.

Dame Miller discussed the changes that have occurred since she was first elected; these include the move from the 24-hour news cycle to the non-stop news cycle facilitated by social media. She discussed the growing role of citizen journalists who can play a constructive role in a diverse media environment but who also may create issues through a lack of professional standards.

The first goal that Dame Miller sought to attain after election was to learn to be an effective Parliamentarian. For her this meant not just understanding the mechanism of legislation but also how to build relationships with key people across the parliament to advance issues that mattered to her community. She noted that no matter what role she took on in the parliament, representing her community was always the first priority.

As the Chair of the CPA UK Branch, Dame Miller has been working to increase female participation across the globe. She challenged delegates to ensure that there were mechanisms in place to support female participation in their parliamentary processes.

In Conversation

Rt Hon David Lammy MP, Member for Tottenham Shadow Foreign Secretary, House of Commons UK Parliament

Representing a London electorate with a large working class population with a large demographic of people from the Caribbean as well as migrants including his parents from former British colonies in Africa. Many Caribbean families arrived as part of the Windrush Generation in the 1960s and have faced discrimination.

David had a stellar legal career prior to being elected in 2000. He has risen and fallen in both Government and Opposition, always remains connected and driven by constituents and community.

David identified the importance of MPs being outspoken for their community. In his community the Grenfell Tower Disaster, 2011 riots and the Windrush scandal provided him an opportunity to stand up for his community. While pushing for outspokenness, David noted that to really change things, you need to be in Government, so you need to find the balance between being outspoken and maintaining party discipline.

The Commonwealth is viewed by David as an opportunity to use a common history and governance language to tackle the big issues. He would like to see development measures being re-visioned.

Day 2

The Role and Power of the Speaker

Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle, Speaker of the House of Commons, UK Parliament

Prior to his election as Speaker, Sir Hoyle was a Councillor in the Chorley Borough, prior to being elected to the UK Parliament representing Chorley. He had a long career as a backbencher, being elected to the Ways & Means committee Chair and Deputy Speaker of the House of Commons.

Following extensive Council and Parliamentary experience, all as a Member of the Labour Party, Lindsay was elected from opposition to be the Speaker in 2019. The Speaker comes from a Labour family from a Labour area. He has been active in the Labour party and participated in all great debates, defeats and victories. As is tradition he resigned from the Party when elected Speaker. He found this challenging but felt if one respects the office of the Speaker, then one must follow the conventions of the role.

Mr Speaker identified his key role is to ensure correct scrutiny, transparency and accountability of the Executive Government. An important aspect of this is ensuring that all members are able to have their voices heard. While much of this occurs in the chamber, the Speaker also spoke of the important role of mentoring and supporting all MPs, particularly new MPs, to understand how to represent their constituency effectively both inside and outside the chamber.

“A lot can be achieved but you have to understand how things work and this place can be pretty confusing when you are new.”

Like other presenters, Mr Speaker spoke of the importance of maintaining a focus on representing your constituency no matter what role you play in Parliament. He noted how this had changed since he was elected Speaker but he still paid close attention to the needs of his community.

On a final note, Speaker Hoyle is the President of the UK Rugby League and an avid supporter of the Warrington Wolves. He loves State of Origin and said that he and his father, secured the release of Alfie Langer from the Wolves to play in the 2001 series

Ensuring Representation and Diversity in Parliaments

The need to increase female participation is a key goal for the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association. Many delegates, particularly those from African nations, noted significant cultural and social challenges to achieving greater participation.

There was an interesting discussion about whether Parliaments can be or should be a reflection of society as it exists or a leader by example of society as it could or should be.

There were numerous approaches noted. The Bangladesh Parliament reserves seats for women. The Welsh Senedd considering how to deal with this issue as the move to proportional representation voting system. Many delegates were interested in the fact that equity is often driven internally by political parties in Australian Parliaments.

Hon Dulcie Elaine Tei, was the first member elected to the Legislative Assembly of Tonga. She noted several challenges in full participation in parliamentary processes but reported good progress.

In addition to gender diversity delegates discussed ethnic diversity. This can be quite challenging in some nations. For example, Zambia has 80 language groups.

Participation of people with disabilities was also noted by delegates as important with many parliament taking steps to ensure accessibility, if a person with a disability is elected.

LGBTQIA+ diversity was also discussed. There was certainly not consensus on this issue with several delegates noting strong cultural and legal prohibitions to alternative sexuality.

Privilege & Conduct: Standards & Behaviour

Daniel Greenberg CB, Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, UK House of Commons

The UK Parliament has a Code of Conduct based on Nolan Inquiry which established Seven Principles of Public Life.

The Parliamentary Commissioner of Standards has powers to investigate and prepares reports for Parliamentary Committee. The Committee then has a role to confirm/review validity of investigation and determine penalty.

This approach attempts to achieve non-partisan review of complaints by methods of involving non-MPs in investigation process. Presumably the investigators have more time, greater focus, greater investigatory skill and are backed by the powers of parliamentary inquiry.

The UK separates investigations of bullying, harassment and sexual misconduct from other complaints and has a different process for managing these complaints.

One of the key features of this system is to leave final determination of validity of the investigations and determination of penalties in the hands of MPs, thus maintaining Parliamentary sovereignty.

Prime Minister's Question Time

Delegates observed Prime Minister's Questions. Several key differences noted from the Queensland Parliament including:

- Only the PM answered questions
- Questions didn't necessarily have to pertain to decisions or responsibilities of the Executive Government
- Long pre-ambles were tolerated

Following the PMQ delegates discussed and explored various approaches to using Question Time for accountability and transparency. Kenya has an external Cabinet and has only just introduced ability for non-Members to attend the chamber for the purpose of questioning. Sierra Leone re-introduced Question Time in 2019 with an improvement in Ministerial accountability

Some of the different approaches noted by delegates included:

- Non-timed questions with Speaker managing time - UK and New Zealand
- Supplementary Questions – New Zealand, Montserrat
- Separately questioning Prime Minister or Equivalent from Other Ministers - Wales

Day 4

Parliamentary Practice

Delegates engaged in a range of practical exercises, workshops and role plays to develop skills in a range of areas including:

- Effective Communication

- Conducting Parliamentary Inquiries
- Questioning Witnesses

Delegates discussed various approaches to the structure of Parliamentary Committees with differing views on the effectiveness of non-Government chairs. In some parliaments, delegates noted that it was hard to get the balance right between constructive accountability and transparency and political obstruction.

Day 5

Constituency Visit

Vauxhall Constituency

Florence Eshalomi MP, Shadow Cabinet Minister Cabinet Office

Elected in 2019, Florence was formally a Lambeth Councillor. The Council area covers a fairly similar area to the constituency of Vauxhall. The area is inner city with a very mixed socioeconomic demographic. It includes Brixton which is a focal point for the Caribbean and African communities of London.

Security is an ongoing issue for British MPs with two MPs having been murdered while conducting “Constituency Surgeries”. These are similar to Mobile Offices. Florence does not have a publicly accessible office. All interactions are in the community with security measures in place.

Florence identified cost of living, housing and the War in Ukraine as being major issues of concern for her constituents. Climate Change is also an issue of concern.

Benefits obtained from Overseas Travel

- Opportunity to reflect and improve upon personal parliamentary practice
- Comparison of Queensland Parliamentary Practice with other jurisdictions
- Personal connections and links with 28 jurisdictions
- Trade inquiries from four constituencies
- Consideration of current issues in Queensland in comparison to those in other jurisdictions, including exploration of alternative policy approaches
- Contribution to significant discussions regarding the improvement of parliamentary diversity

Conference Program

Tabled separately.

Personal Component of Travel

Five business days spent in London for personal reasons. All expenses borne personally.

Conclusion

Drawn from around the globe, delegates shared values and experience of the Westminster System.

There was a shared commitment to the rule of law and equity before it. Democracy was a core value with all people having the opportunity to fully participate in the system. There was a recognition of the fundamental importance of Executive Governments being transparent and accountable, and the role that Members of Parliament play in holding governments to account

There are many opportunities for exploring alternative approaches to parliamentary practice to improve effectiveness. Members of Parliament and officials, while dealing with vastly different communities and issues, share a common approach to governance.

People come to these roles from various backgrounds, but all are people of good will with the intention of serving their communities. The commitment of individual members to work cooperatively within their parliaments and across the Commonwealth present a great opportunity to continue to improve the efficiency of our Westminster System.