



Speakers' Delegations: Beyond the Headlines

Hon. Peter Watson MLA
Speaker of the Legislative Assembly of Western Australia

Introduction

Every year about this time, I get emails from journalists asking whether there will be any Speaker or committee travel occurring over the winter recess. In fact, just the other day, a journalist wrote to me asking: "We are a writing a story about an upcoming overseas trip involving the Speaker and handful of other MPs. Could you please provide today:

- A list of the MPs going on the trip?
- The destination and duration?
- The purpose of the trip?
- The total budget/cost of the trip?"

Trouble was, he had got his facts wrong, in that there was no upcoming overseas trip involving the Speaker and a handful of other MPs. In fact, I had already led a delegation of three members overseas several months earlier, so we had managed to fly under the radar, so to speak, on that one. I was able to reply to him that I was tabling a report on the visit that afternoon, which would include responses to all of his questions.

All too often, however, the main focus for the media when members travel is the cost of the trip, not the value or benefit to the members, the Parliament or the State. All they are interested in is a sensational two-second headline grab, such as one from February 2014: "Speaker Michael Sutherland and MPs run up \$140,000 travel bill." It was interesting to note that in the countries where I most recently led a Speaker's delegation, Oman and the United Arab Emirates, the visit was reported very favourably in news articles, Facebook pages and on Twitter.

Background

So what are Speaker's Delegations? Since the early 2000s, Speakers of the Western Australian Legislative Assembly have led delegations of members of the Legislative Assembly to visit

Western Australia's major overseas trading partners. Previous visits have included China, Japan, India and Sri Lanka, South Korea, Indonesia, United Arab Emirates, Oman and Qatar, and South Africa.

The Speaker decides on the destination, timing and composition of the delegation, and funding is provided from the budget of the Department of the Legislative Assembly. The Speaker does not seek permission from the Premier, as it is a *parliamentary* delegation, not a *government* delegation. However, while it is a parliamentary delegation, the members are also there to represent Western Australia and its interests.

The principal aims of these visits have been to:

- introduce members of the Legislative Assembly to Western Australia's major trading partners and involve them in discussions with corporations and others with significant interests in Western Australia;
- broaden the understanding of Western Australian members of political, governmental, economic, educational and cultural matters in those countries and to pursue the aims of sister-state arrangements where they exist;
- develop friendship and understanding at a high level between the Western Australian Parliament and Western Australia's partners and neighbours; and
- in some cases, facilitate assistance at a Parliamentary level.

Timing

In terms of timing, it largely depends on when in the parliamentary calendar there is a two-week or three-week recess period. Speakers don't take delegations overseas during the winter break or summer recess period, so they generally tend to occur in April, although they have occurred later in the year, such as September or October. For my last two delegations, we have gone for 10 or 11 days in April, coming back just before ANZAC Day.

Funding

Funding for Speakers' delegations comes from the Legislative Assembly funds. All travel costs, including flights, accommodation, meals, allowances, and incidentals are covered. The delegation to China last year cost \$61,500 and to the Gulf Region this year \$91,600.

Composition

For most delegations, Speakers have attempted to select members from each of the parties represented in the House, to ensure that the delegation is bipartisan. For the two delegations I have taken overseas, I have taken one Labor member, one Liberal member and one National Party member. To my mind, this also helps to short-circuit any attempts by anyone to make political mileage out of the trip.

In terms of who is selected to be on a Speaker's delegation, I choose new or upcoming members (that is, ones who I think show potential), those with an interest in the countries visited, or those members with experience or who would make a valuable or meaningful contribution in meetings. This provides an ideal form of professional development which would not otherwise be available. I also take along the Clerk, who keeps us on the straight and narrow, particularly when it comes to using our credit cards, and who makes sure we don't get into any trouble!

You only have to look at the composition of previous Speakers' delegations to see that many of the members have gone on to become ministers and even Premiers. This is not to say that accompanying a Speaker's delegation ensures your elevation to Cabinet (although perhaps that could be a drawcard I can use for future trips!), but it ensures we get better informed members about Western Australia's important trading relationships. In fact, I went on a few during my 18 year career as a member of parliament, which stood me in good stead when it came to leading my own delegation.

Overseas Western Australian Government Offices

When it comes to preparing a travel schedule, we request the Western Australian Department of Jobs, Tourism, Science and Innovation (or JTSI as it is called) to develop a suitable program. JTSI was formed on 1 July 2017 as part of the Western Australian Government's Machinery of Government changes and took over responsibilities from the previous Department of State Development. JTSI is Western Australia's lead agency for economic development, international trade and investment, and tourism.

Western Australia has well-established economic, social and cultural partnerships with many regions around the world. The Government of Western Australian operates offices in the State's key trading regions, which are managed by JTSI. These overseas offices help to promote the State as a place to invest, work, live and study. The eight overseas trade and investment offices are located in China; Japan; India; Europe; Indonesia; the Middle East and Africa; Singapore; and South Korea. Each overseas office is headed by a Commissioner (or the Agent General in the case of Europe).

In JTSI's Perth Office, there are a number of Country Managers responsible for the various regions, including South East and South Asia; Greater China; Japan, South Korea and the Americas; Europe, Middle East and Africa.

We contact the relevant JTSI Country Manager when a decision is made to take a delegation overseas. They liaise with the relevant overseas Commissioner and develop a program, taking into account major Western Australian trade, business, education and other interests, what is happening at the time in the country, for example any relevant conferences or expos, and what the Members themselves would like to look at. They also arrange meetings with senior government leaders, government departments and officials, and even royalty.

Speaker's delegations are accompanied by the relevant Commissioner, who provides expert assistance and advice during the trip. They have the knowledge and experience of the region to assist the delegation in navigating the countries and in providing insights into the way in which the Region works.

Before the visit, delegation members are provided with detailed economic and political briefing notes about each of the countries visited, and background notes about the organisations and individuals on the program. The delegation also gets a briefing on the visit, program, customs and protocol when they arrive at their first destination.

We don't involve the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade in our travel arrangements, although on occasions overseas Commissioners have relied on Australian Embassies to secure meetings with government officials. This occurred in Oman, where the Australian Embassies in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi provided assistance and support in setting up meetings and they also attended a number of those meetings with the delegation.

Purpose and Value

These visits provide an opportunity for the parliamentarians to gain a greater knowledge and understanding of a country's economy, culture, government, political and industry sectors, to examine trade and other links between Western Australia and the country visited, and to reinforce stronger ties between Western Australia and that country.

Western Australia also has a number of sister-state relationships that provide an additional dimension to any parliamentary visit to those countries. These include Zhejiang Province in China, Hyogo Prefecture in Japan, and East Java in Indonesia.

I see Speakers' delegation visits as pro-active ways to further develop and strengthen a country's relationship with Western Australia. Relationships with countries are complex and operate on many different levels: parliamentary, governmental, trade, cultural, business, education, philanthropic, etc. Every visit or exchange between two countries at any of these levels further strengthens and positively reinforces a relationship.

In visiting a country, delegation members can discuss what Western Australia has to offer and the countries in turn talk to us about what they have to offer. For example, in Oman we spoke with the Oman Royal Navy about Austal, a Western Australian company which has a successful shipbuilding contract with the Royal Navy of Oman. They in turn spoke about the possibility of training Omani midshipmen in Western Australia. Likewise, one of the Ministers we met with in the United Arab Emirates was interested in visiting our Police Academy and learning more about our police cadet training. Hopefully something comes of these two opportunities.

How a Speaker's delegation visit is viewed by the countries visited cannot be underestimated. They are seen as high level and evidence of the significance with which the relationship is

viewed by Western Australia. Delegation visits shine a light on a region and show that Western Australia has an interest in countries in that region. It also raises awareness of Western Australia and what we have to offer.

Speaker's delegations open doors to meetings with government leaders and senior government officials, and senior representatives from businesses, companies and educational institutions. One of the benefits of this level of access is that the Western Australian Government Commissioner, who wouldn't ordinarily have this type of access, is able to build on what was discussed in meetings to further the interests of Western Australia. Hence, these delegations provide an important benefit to the State.

Speaker's Delegations: China in 2018 and Gulf Region 2019

As mentioned, I most recently led a delegation of three members to Oman and the United Arab Emirates in April 2019. The visit lasted for 11 days and we travelled to Muscat in Oman, and Dubai, Abu Dhabi and Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates. One surprising aspect was that some had not heard of Perth, but had heard of Sydney and Melbourne. But as we reiterated at every meeting, in terms of geographical proximity, Perth is closest Australian capital city to the Gulf Region, making Western Australia the "gateway to Australia". Perth is only an 11 hour flight from Dubai, which is the business capital and trade hub of the United Arab Emirates. Two-thirds of the world's population live within an eight hour flight from Dubai, which highlights the importance of the region to Western Australia.

Last year, in April I led a delegation to Beijing, Shanghai, Hangzhou, Wuzhen, Tongxiang and Ningbo for 10 days. Some of the specific areas of interest to the Members included: tourism opportunities between China and Australia and how Western Australia could be better promoted to Chinese tourists; increasing the number of international students to Western Australia; meeting with Chinese universities with links to Western Australian universities; examining what opportunities exist in the imported food and drink market for Western Australian products; and potential areas of collaboration in sporting activities and programs.

In fact, following the delegation's meeting with the Director and other representatives from the Sports Bureau of Zhejiang Province, a Memorandum of Understanding has been finalised between the Sports Bureau and the Western Australian Minister for Sport and Recreation. At its meeting, the delegation had discussed the establishment of a Sports Exchange Committee to work on establishing potential areas of collaboration which would benefit both countries. The China Commissioner and staff followed up on this discussion point with the resulting MOU being drafted.

Review and audit of WA's Trade and Investment Offices

I just want to finish by touching on a review and audit which has been commissioned into Western Australia's overseas trade and investment offices.

A recent scandal involving the Western Australian Commissioner in Japan has led to an independent review and audit of the Western Australian overseas trade and investment offices. A Corruption and Crime Commission (CCC) report released in March this year¹ alleged corrupt behaviour by the State's former Commissioner in Japan, Craig Peacock, who had been in the role since 2002. Amongst other things, it claimed he had double-dipped on cost-of-living allowance claims up to \$500,000, and covered up a drink-driving accident in a State-leased car, which involved him spending 48 hours in a police cell, being fined, and disqualified from driving.

The report further claimed that in 2015, Mr Peacock used State resources to arrange for two Legislative Council members to have \$700 massages at a Japanese bathhouse known as a "soapland". Mr Peacock was subsequently sacked and on 21 May, the Premier advised an Assembly Estimates hearing that the State Solicitor had commenced recovery proceedings against Mr Peacock, including the freezing of his assets, in both Australia and Japan. In addition, the State Solicitor had reached an out-of-court settlement with Mr Peacock, who had agreed to pay \$540 000 in reimbursement to the State.²

On its website³, JTSI advises in relation to the review of the overseas trade and investment offices, "it has become clear that there are substantially different practices between each office and there are likely opportunities to raise standards and outcomes, and share positive learning, all the while acknowledging the influence of local business conditions in each location." It also noted that the review will "make practical recommendations to ensure that the eight overseas trade and investment offices undertake their functions efficiently and effectively, with integrity and due regard for government policies and priorities and the public interest."

Audit

In terms of the independent audit, KPMG has been awarded the contract to deliver the audit program, which will be completed within six months. The audit program will "assess the efficiency and effectiveness of the internal controls, and the compliance of each office with legislation, policy and good practice in selected areas. Each audit will include: an expense audit, covering the last six years; a review of existing controls to prevent and detect fraudulent transactions; and an audit of remuneration, entitlements and travel of all Commissioners and Agent Generals over the last ten years."⁴

¹ Corruption and Crime Commission, *Report on the WA Commissioner in Japan*, 12 March 2019 (Tabled Paper No. 2247, Tabled on 12-Mar-2019)

² *WA Hansard*, Assembly Estimates Committee A, Tuesday, 21 May 2019, p.E43

³ <https://www.jtsi.wa.gov.au/invest-in-wa/our-services/global-offices/review-and-audit-of-western-australia's-overseas-trade-and-investment-offices>

⁴ *ibid.*

Accountability and transparency

In previous parliaments, only a passing reference was made in annual reports about Speakers' delegations. There was no mention of the cost. Since 2014, however, reports have been tabled which have listed the travel costs, reasons for the visit, and details of principal meetings. I think it is important to be open, transparent and accountable, and if the travel can be shown to be of value, not only to members and Parliament, but also to the State, it's worth doing.

Conclusion

In my view, leading Speaker's delegations overseas is an important part of a Speaker's role. It is important for the Legislative Assembly to engage with our trading partners and close neighbours to ensure mutual development and cooperation, and to enable a proper understanding by members of the continuing importance of these links.