



Report of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

2019 Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments

London, United Kingdom

November 25 to 29, 2019

Report

Senators Leo Housakos and Mohamed-Iqbal Ravalia attended the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association's 2019 Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments, on behalf of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA), in London, United Kingdom (U.K.) from November 25 to 29, 2019.

Purpose

The annual Westminster Seminar is CPA U.K.'s flagship capacity-building program for parliamentarians and appointed procedural and committee clerks from across the Commonwealth. The program provides a unique platform for participants from across the Commonwealth to network and engage with counterparts, explore approaches to parliamentary democracy, examine practice and procedure in the context of the Westminster system and draw comparisons between Commonwealth legislatures.

Objective

The objective of the seminar was for delegates to gain a better understanding of how to effectively scrutinize, represent and deliver oversight in their parliaments.

Output 1: Delegates will have a wider network, creating open communication lines to work collaboratively with their peers.

Output 2: Delegates will have practical skills to enhance their leadership and administrative roles in their respective legislatures.

Output 3: Delegates will have a deeper understanding of the components that constitute an effective parliament within the Westminster context, using examples from the U.K. and across the Commonwealth.

Specific Topics Discussed

- Roles and responsibilities in the context of effective parliaments
- Diversity within parliament
- U.K. politics in 2019
- The political scene around international trade
- Public engagement
- Social media and democracy

- Pressures on parliamentarians
- Privilege: standards, behaviour and etiquette
- Role of the Speaker
- Impact of committees and committees across the Commonwealth
- Holding the government to account and public accounts committees
- Local democracy
- Sub-national and local governance structures within the Commonwealth
- Effective models of scrutiny

Summary

The 68th seminar took place from Monday, November 25 to Friday, November 29, 2019, in Westminster, London. The program took an experience-based approach, drawing on the perspectives of contributors and participants to stimulate discussion and learning on the role of parliamentarians.

Forty parliamentarians from over 32 Commonwealth legislatures took part in the seminar, designed to explore the role of a parliamentarian in an effective parliament.

Throughout the week, participants heard from U.K. parliamentarians, academics and experts on areas including the pressures parliamentarians face, holding the prime minister to account and the impact of committees. Commonwealth parliamentarians also shared their insights with colleagues, including those on committee systems in Gibraltar and Pakistan and parliamentary privileges in the Ugandan context.

Opening Day

On the first day, delegates explored the current political context of Westminster. Sessions focused on diversity within parliament, what makes an effective parliament and the reasons why 2019 has been such a historically defining year for politics in the U.K. This overview enabled delegates to set the scene for discussions which followed throughout the week.

The keynote speech was delivered by the Right Honourable Lord Boateng who highlighted the importance of maintaining ties within the Commonwealth as well as the need for parliamentarians to have a sense of ownership over their parliamentary processes in order to ensure the effectiveness of their legislatures.

With many participants keen to hear more on the current Brexit debate and state of U.K. politics, the Right Honourable Lord Boateng and Parliamentary Journalist Tony Grew held a discussion looking at the challenges currently faced by parliamentarians, including

balancing party politics with personal views, expectations of constituents and the upcoming general election.

Following this, delegates heard from a range of speakers from across parliament including the Workplace Equality Networks and Diversity and Inclusion team for a session focused on diversity within parliament. This discussion gave delegates the opportunity to look at the work being done to adopt a more inclusive culture in Westminster, to improve diversity in all aspects including age and educational background and to ensure that parliament is truly reflective of society.

The day concluded with a session on the current changes taking place in the global trade landscape and the growing potential for Commonwealth countries to expand trade between members and beyond. This was presented by the Honourable Senator Leo Housakos and Dr. Stephen Woolcock, Associate Professor in the Department of International Relations at the London School of Economics.

Communicating Effectively

One key area of focus throughout the week was on the development of communication skills in all aspects of parliamentary work.

A session was held on public engagement during day two of the seminar, looking at the importance of public participation in a parliamentary democracy through the approach taken by the House of Commons Public Engagement team. Members heard about the different platforms used to increase public interest and transparency of parliament including social media, outreach programs and facilities such as the House of Commons Education Centre.

This was followed by a talk on social media and democracy. Emphasis was placed on the growing importance of social media in a parliamentary democracy, particularly for communicating with constituents and increasing public engagement. It also touched on the responsibility of parliamentarians to protect the public against misinformation. Delegates shared the innovative ways in which they use social media to better engage their constituents including the use of WhatsApp groups, allowing for direct conversation with the communities they serve.

The “Communications” segment of the program was concluded with a more practical session led by Kate Faragher, Director of Bespoke Skills. This workshop consisted of interactive activities including delegates filming one another giving self-introductions and describing their roles, eye contact exercises for more assertive communication and other practical tips for effective communication.

Holding an Effective Committee Inquiry

With a focus on the scrutiny aspect of parliamentary work, delegates took part in a committee inquiry exercise on the third day, examining U.K. policy on cyber security. Using the skills gained in the communication sessions, delegates put into practice their assertive communication and questioning techniques to effectively scrutinize policy and run a successful committee inquiry.

Facilitated by a committee specialist and senior clerk, members were tasked with conducting an effective inquiry. They prepared relevant questions and key recommendations based on the evidence heard to write a report.

A Look at Local Governance

The week consisted of various visits, including a day at Guildhall, home to the City of London Corporation, focused on local governance structures. With delegates from provincial assemblies and smaller legislatures, members were able to spend the fourth day discussing how to bring effective change to democracy at the local level and how their work translates to the national level. Throughout the day, delegates heard from members of the London Assembly, the Commonwealth Local Government Forum and other Commonwealth legislatures sharing their experiences of best practice, innovation and the challenges facing smaller legislatures.

Closing Ceremony

On the final day of the seminar, members had a chance to reflect on the week-long program and to think about how they can transfer their new skills into practice.

The closing ceremony was held in the Palace of Westminster. Presided over by the Right Honourable Lord Haselhurst, delegates were congratulated on their completion of the program and were encouraged to maintain the strong networks they built over the week and to continue the knowledge-sharing process.

Respectfully submitted,

Ms. Yasmin Ratansi, M.P.
Chair of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
ACTIVITY	2019 Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments
DESTINATION	London, United Kingdom
DATES	November 25 to 29, 2019
DELEGATION	
SENATE	Hon. Leo Housakos Hon. Mohamed-Iqbal Ravalia
HOUSE OF COMMONS	
STAFF	
TRANSPORTATION	\$4,364.25
ACCOMMODATION	\$4,785.64
HOSPITALITY	\$0.00
PER DIEMS	\$1,916.65
OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$0.00
MISCELLANEOUS	\$1,010.38
TOTAL	\$12,076.92