



Report of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

Bilateral Visit to Guyana

Georgetown, Guyana

November 13 to 18, 2023

Report

A delegation from the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visited Guyana from November 13 to 18, 2023. Ms. Alexandra Mendès, M.P., Chair of the Branch, led the delegation composed of the Honourable Salma Ataullahjan, Senator, Mr. Rhéal Éloi Fortin, M.P. and Mr. Robert Kitchen, M.P. Accompanying the delegation was Mr. Rémi Bourgault, Secretary of the Canadian Branch.

The Association's constitution encourages visits between member countries to give parliamentarians an opportunity to discuss issues of common interest in bilateral relations and matters related to the Commonwealth as a whole. The visit to Guyana aimed to strengthen ties with our partners in the Commonwealth Caribbean, in keeping with the Canadian Branch's mandate to facilitate twinning arrangements between Canada's provincial and territorial legislatures and the Caribbean.

A wide range of topics were discussed during the bilateral visit, including the state of parliamentary democracy as well as the challenges of climate change, border sovereignty, natural resources and infrastructure.

GEOGRAPHY

Guyana, officially known as the Co-operative Republic of Guyana, is a country on the northern mainland of South America. The country is bordered by the Atlantic Ocean to the north, Brazil to the south and southwest, Venezuela to the west, and Suriname to the east. The capital is Georgetown.

Guyana is the third-smallest country in South America after Suriname and Uruguay. It is the only country in South America with English as its official language and it shares cultural and historical bonds with the "Anglophone Caribbean."¹ For this reason, it is a member state of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM), an intergovernmental organization that is a political and economic union of 15 member states and five associate members, since August 1973.

HISTORY

The territory that is now the co-operative republic of Guyana (Guyana) has been inhabited by many different groups of indigenous peoples, who gave the area the name "guiana," meaning "land of water." In the 16th century, the Netherlands created trading posts in the area, and later established plantations worked by African slaves. Other Europeans settled in the area, but the United Kingdom (U.K.) gradually became the dominant power.

The U.K. united the territories that compose modern Guyana in 1831. In the following years, the U.K. began replacing former slave labour with indentured workers from India. In the late-19th century, valuable commodities were discovered in the colony, including gold. This development accelerated settlement, but also contributed to territorial disputes

¹ Most languages spoken in the Caribbean are either European languages (namely English, Spanish, French, and Dutch) or European language-based creoles. Spanish speakers are the most numerous in the Caribbean followed by English speakers. English is the official language of about 18 Caribbean territories inhabited by about 6 million people.

with its neighbours, Venezuela and Suriname, which remain unresolved to date. Venezuela's land claim includes more than half of Guyana's territory.

Universal adult suffrage was introduced in Guyana in 1953. However, the subsequent election produced a left-wing government that alarmed the U.K., which then suspended the constitution and appointed an interim administration. Free elections were held again in 1957, and shortly thereafter the U.K. convened discussions on the terms of full self-government. Negotiations were complicated by longstanding tensions between Guyana's largest two communities – people of African and Indian origin – but in 1966 Guyana was granted independence. It became a republic in 1970.

GOVERNMENT AND POLITICS

Guyana is a parliamentary republic. The president exercises supreme executive power and serves as the head of state as well as the head of government. The position is indirectly elected; after a general election, the leader of the largest party in the National Assembly automatically becomes president. The president appoints and is assisted by several vice presidents and a prime minister. Presidents may serve for a maximum of two five-year terms.

The National Assembly is Guyana's unicameral parliament. It has 65 members elected for five-year terms by proportional representation.² Of the total membership, 40 members are elected through national party lists and 25 members are elected from 10 regional party lists.

The 2015 Guyanese general election saw the political party A Partnership for National Unity (APNU) – the successor party to the PNC – win the largest number of seats in the Assembly for the first time since 1992, in coalition with its partner Alliance for Change (AFC). The most recent election took place in March 2020. The PPP/C won most of the seats, after a disputed voting recount, thus defeating the APNU AFC coalition. Since 2020, there are 71 members in the National Assembly, of which 26 (36,32%) are women. The next elections are expected to take place in 2025.

The government led by the APNU-AFC coalition signed a contract with an oil company in 2016 and was criticized for a lack of transparency in its negotiations to sell the production licence for newly discovered offshore petroleum deposits. The current government led by the PNC promised to re-negotiate the terms of the contract with the oil company, but that renegotiation did not include the royalty and taxes.³ By the end of 2020, another 17 oil fields had been found in Guyana's Stabroek Block – the offshore oil reservoir off Guyana's Atlantic coast – and it was projected that by 2025 these fields would be yielding some 750,000 barrels of oil per day. The government expects significant new revenues from oil in the coming years; the oil production will also spur growth in other economic sectors and is expected to raise the country's standard of living.

² The National Assembly may have up to 72 members because it allows for a maximum of four non-elected ministers and two non elected Parliamentary Secretaries to sit in the Assembly. If the Speaker is not an elected member, they become a member of the National Assembly by virtue of holding the office of Speaker.

³ [Guyana already re-negotiated Exxon's oil contract](#)," Kaieteur News, 21 February 2023.

Guyana has a common law legal system. Its highest court of appeal is the Caribbean Court of Justice, the judicial institution of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM). CARICOM Secretariat is based in Georgetown, the capital of Guyana.

ECONOMIC OVERVIEW

Guyana is one of the fastest growing economies in the world, due to the ongoing development of its oil and gas sector with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) stating it grew by 62% in 2022 and is expected to add another 37% this year. Guyana's projected oil reserves – estimated at 13 billion barrels to date - could place it among the top 20 oil producers in the world, and the largest per capita.

BILATERAL RELATIONS

Guyana and Canada enjoy a close relationship built on more than 50 years of deep people-to-people ties, important trading connections, a longstanding development program and our security partnership. Canada first opened the High Commission of Canada to Guyana, in Georgetown, in March 1964, and established full diplomatic relations after Guyana's independence in May 1966. Canada continues to support Guyana's capacity building efforts with Canadian experts assisting various institutions.

Canada is one of Guyana's largest trading partners (\$294.1M in two-way trade in 2022; exports \$52.7 million; imports \$241.4 million). A Canada-Guyana Chamber of Commerce was launched in Georgetown in December 2020.

Canada is home to a politically active and business-oriented Guyanese diaspora of close to 100,000 and many more who have settled in Canada decades earlier. Many Guyanese Government members have studied, or have children that are studying, in Canada. In 2019, there were over 500 Guyanese students on study permits, in addition more than 10,000 Guyanese tourists who visited Canada.

Meeting with the Honourable Manzoor Nadir, M.P., Speaker of the National Assembly of the Parliament of Guyana and members of the Parliamentary Management Committee

The Hon. Manzoor Nadir is the Speaker of the National Assembly of the 12th Parliament of Guyana. He is also the President of the Guyana Branch of the CPA. Speaker Nadir is an economist and has been an elected official since 1992, where he was in opposition in the National Assembly from 1992 to 2001. Afterwards, he became the party leader of the United Force while serving as the Minister of Labour from 2001 to 2011.

A meeting was held with members of the National Assembly, during which best practices were shared and weaknesses were identified that could be addressed through training and exchanges, such as with the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia. It was noted that women were well represented at the meeting. Also mentioned was that the Parliament of Guyana needs to include more young members, and the system must allow for full-time members.

Meeting with Mr. Robert Persaud, Foreign Secretary, Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Co-operation

The Foreign Secretary spoke about the significance of the Canadian delegation's visit to bilateral relations. Also mentioned was how large the Guyanese diaspora is in Canada, especially in the Toronto area. He said that Canada was one of the first to want to help Guyana following the discovery of oil and gas resources, and many transformations were made possible by this partnership. Many issues were discussed, including climate change, food insecurity, the country's admission to the United Nations Security Council, and the territorial dispute with Venezuela. He raised the country's infrastructure development needs, including the need for skilled labour to deliver its projects. According to Mr. Persaud, the aim is to develop the oil industry while protecting the environment.

Breakfast Meeting with Honourable Brig. (Ret'd) Mark Phillips, M.S.S., M.P., Prime Minister of the Cooperative Republic of Guyana

The Hon. Brigadier (Ret'd) Mark Anthony Phillips was appointed by the President, in August 2020, as the Prime Minister of Guyana. He is also an elected official since September 2020. Previously, he served as the Chief of Staff of the Guyana Defence Force from 2013 to 2016 and was an active military officer from 1981 to 2016. Following his appointment as Prime Minister, he was assigned responsibility for the energy sector, the Civil Defence Commission, and the information sector.

The Prime Minister welcomed the delegation to Guyana. He stressed the importance of the ties between Canada and his country. The Prime Minister also took the opportunity to discuss the international issues facing his country as well as its challenges responding to rapid economic growth. He was joined by the Minister in the Prime Minister's Office responsible for Communications, Kwame McCoy.

Meeting with the Honourable Dr. Frank Anthony, M.P., Minister of Health

The Minister of Health presented the country's new health infrastructure development plan. The needs are considerable. The government is working to eliminate several infectious diseases, such as leprosy, filaria, chagas and leishmaniasis. The government also wants to improve screening for diseases such as hepatitis C and dengue fever. As for non-infectious diseases, the government is developing a cancer program with a new oncology centre. Mental health is also a major concern. With regard to human resources, several staff retention and training strategies are being considered. There is a partnership with York University. To help make healthcare services more accessible in rural areas, several technologies are now being used, and the government wants to improve access to telemedicine. The government will also be building several new hospitals.

Working Lunch with Hon. Vickram Outar Bharrat, M.P., Minister of Natural Resources

The Hon. Vickram Outar Bharrat is the Minister of Natural Resources since August 2020. Previously, he was an educator and an entrepreneur.

During the working lunch, the Minister mentioned that his country wanted to boost oil production. He spoke about the importance of the gas-fired power plant development project and the development opportunities in the vicinity of the plant. He said that for the good of the country and its people, it is important to maintain the oil supply before moving toward renewable energies. The Minister said that it is important for the country to re-

assess its mineral resources, even if that is very expensive. He praised the good relationship with Canada and mentioned the importance of the diaspora.

Meeting with the Honourable Aubrey Norton, M.P., Leader of the Opposition

The Hon. Aubrey Norton was elected leader of the People's National Congress Reform Party in December 2021, and in April 2022, he was officially elected to the National Assembly and holds the role of the Leader of the Opposition.

The meeting with the Leader of the Opposition and members of his coalition gave the delegation an alternative view of Guyanese democracy. Opposition members clearly expressed their frustration with Guyana's parliamentary system and its major shortcomings. They said that, apart from the tabling of the budget, the Members have not attended more than 10 sittings in just over a year. Parliament should sit more often, as should its committees. For example, they said that the committee responsible for the rapidly developing natural resources sector has not met in almost two years. The delegation also heard again that the position of Member is not full-time, so Members need to have other employment.

Meeting with the Honourable Collin Croal, M.P, Minister of Housing and Water

The Hon. Collin Croal is the Minister of Housing and Water and he was first elected to Parliament in 2015.

The Minister explained the work of his government. The government takes a humanitarian approach to housing so that nobody is left behind. There is a partnership with the private sector to build housing at a fixed cost, with minimal profit and at low interest rates. Incorporating local materials into the construction is important. The purchasers are also the owners of the land, which facilitates financing. By 2025, all homes should have access to drinking water, and wells are being dug and better maintained. The government is also focused on water quality. In the capital, 100% of the water is treated. The Minister was accompanied by the Hon. Susan M. Rodrigues, M.P., Minister within the Ministry of Housing and Water.

Meeting with the Honourable Pauline Sukhai, M.P., Minister of Amerindian Affairs

Guyana's indigenous populations officially make up about 11% of the population, although there are many undocumented indigenous people in Guyana.

The Hon. Pauline Campbell-Sukhai is the Minister of Amerindian Affairs since August 2020 and was the Minister of this portfolio previously between January 2008 and May 2015. She is of Guyanese Amerindian origin and an economist. She has been an elected official since 1992.

The Ministry of Amerindian Affairs was established in 2005 to safeguard, protect and promote the social, cultural and economic interest of the Amerindians. A revised Amerindian Act was enacted in 2006 and provides the legal framework for promoting the rights of Amerindians in Guyana.

Extensive natural resources are found on the lands of indigenous groups. Partnerships are being explored to develop ore and aggregates. The Minister mentioned that assistance is available to help indigenous communities review contracts with companies. In 2012 the indigenous population was around 70,000 and is now around 100,000. There

are nine indigenous languages. The Minister explained that it is possible to travel between the different villages, although sometimes they are very far apart.

Meeting with the Dr. Armstrong Alexis, Deputy Secretary-General of CARICOM

The delegation visited the CARICOM Secretariat for a meeting with the Deputy Secretary General, Armstrong Alexis, and the Associate Secretary General, Foreign and Community Relations, Elizabeth Solomon. They discussed the Twinning Initiative, which is the pairing of Canadian provincial legislatures with Parliaments in Caribbean countries. Ms. Mendes stated that Canada is seeking to reinforce its relationship with Caribbean countries and the Twinning Initiative offers an excellent channel to do so. CARICOM representatives said that they are currently looking at the resuscitation of the CARICOM Association of the Caribbean Parliamentarians.

Visit to a Canada Fund for Local Initiatives (CFLI) supported project in Mainstay/Whayaka - Region 2

The delegation began by having a brief meeting with Ms. Vilma De Silva, Regional Chairperson, and Councillors. The project visited includes the construction of shade houses for gardening and the construction of a nature walk where some of the trees and plants used by indigenous people for healing and other needs were identified. The garden is taken care of by the young people of the village, mainly women, and will ultimately be used to provide the guest house which will be built on the edge of the lake to accommodate tourists. The visit was led by Toshao Yvonne Pearson, M.P., Indigenous Chief of Mainstay/Whayaka.

Other

The delegation laid a wreath on behalf of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association at the Military Cemetery, where four Canadians who died in World War II were buried. The delegation also attended a welcome reception hosted by the Speaker of the National Assembly and the official opening of the GuyExpo.

Acknowledgements

The delegation would like to thank the staff of CPA Guyana for preparing the visit itinerary.

Conclusion

The delegation would like to thank Canada's High Commissioner to Guyana, Mr. Mark Berman, for his hospitality, as well as the dedicated staff of the high commission for preparing a very comprehensive itinerary and contributing to a successful visit. The delegates would also like to thank the representatives of Global Affairs Canada and the Library of Parliament who helped prepare the necessary background information.

Respectfully submitted,

Alexandra Mendès, M.P.

Chair of the Canadian Branch of the
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)
ACTIVITY	Bilateral Visit to Guyana
DESTINATION	Georgetown, Guyana
DATES	November 13 to 18, 2023
DELEGATION	
SENATE	Hon. Salma Ataullahjan
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Rhéal Éloi Fortin Robert Kitchen Alexandra Mendès
STAFF	Rémi Bourgault
TRANSPORTATION	\$7,838.01
ACCOMMODATION	\$21,737.29
HOSPITALITY	\$148.21
PER DIEMS	\$2,740.30
OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$0.00
MISCELLANEOUS	\$877.56
TOTAL	\$33,341.37