Of all the events I’ve participated in since my election in May, none have been as hope-inspiring and mind-broadening as the Commonwealth Youth Parliament in Canada. The Commonwealth Youth Parliament was a stirring reminder that Scotland, with our unique heritage, our political discourse and our shared vision, is but one nation of many. That the Scotland branch sent a mentor and youth parliamentarians to this year’s Commonwealth Youth Parliament testifies that, as a nation and a parliament, we want to be outward-looking, rather than self-obsessed, and internationalist, rather than isolated. With over sixty participants representing Commonwealth Parliamentary Association branches in attendance, there was great variety in culture, language and contributions – and yet much camaraderie and unity of purpose.
My own journey started at 3:30am at Edinburgh Airport, having travelled from Dingwall the previous night. Just short of twenty-four hours later, a clerk from the office of the Sergeant-at-Arms of the Legislative Assembly of British Columbia, Artour Sogomonian, met me at the airport. This was a sign of things to come, as the clerks of the Legislative Assembly could not have been more friendly, better prepared or happier to help. They treated the young parliamentarians and mentors like honoured guests from start to finish and it was evident that great preparation preceded our arrival.
After the welcome reception on Sunday night, the hard work began. Each day followed a typical Westminster routine of prayers, debates and question time. The formal parliamentary practice is, apparently, adapted from several Commonwealth countries and proceedings were guided smoothly by British Columbia officials. The young people were divided into two parties, the Government and the Opposition. Each was required to elect a leader, deputy leader and a chief whip. Then it was the new leaders’ responsibility to appoint a cabinet and shadow cabinet. It was particularly fascinating to see ministers appointed to the cabinet with portfolios like indigenous peoples, reflecting the different political challenges across the commonwealth. Youth parliamentarians took a parliamentary bill on youth employment through the various stages over three days, and also took part in a mock press conference.
As mentors, we were each appointed to either the Government or the Opposition. Our responsibilities for the week were to advise the young parliamentarians, participate in formal
presentations on such subjects as engaging with the media, managing election campaigns and the role of a member of Parliament. There were six mentors in total, from Australia, Sri Lanka, Canada and – of course – Scotland. I was quickly silenced when speaking of the 11,863 sq km I represent in Scotland by Adam Marshall, MP for Northern Tablelands in Australia – who represents an area of 53,153 sq km! Yet, interestingly, as a rural politician, Mr Marshall faces many of the same accusations and challenges that I hear as a rural MSP.
As the youth parliamentarians hailed from political systems and cultures across the commonwealth, the caucus meetings were full of debate and diversity of opinion. ‘Madame Premiere’ represented New Zealand, but had grown up in Malaysia. The Deputy was Pakistani and the Chief Whip was Australian. Maiden speeches in the chamber explored rights of indigenous people groups, corruption in government and access to education for underprivileged young people. Our youth parliamentarians, Erin McAuley and Jamie Murray, did Scotland proud.
In short, it was a privilege to work with representatives from the Cayman Islands to Punjab. Against a backdrop of apparently increasing violence and hatred, there is hope if sixty-six young people can share friendship and ideas for global peace, prosperity and progress.