54TH COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE, KUALA LUMPUR, MALAYSIA

Monday 4 August – Sunday 10 August 2008

THEME: “EXPANDING THE ROLE OF PARLIAMENT IN GLOBAL SOCIETY: ENVIRONMENT, DEVELOPMENT AND SECURITY”.

CONFERENCE REPORT

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Mr Sam Gardiner MLA

Mr Peter Gregg Secretary
(NI, Scotland & Wales Branches)
Background

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) holds Plenary Conferences once per year, usually in August/September, to coincide with most member countries summer recesses. Following re-admission to the CPA, the Northern Ireland Branch was invited to send one delegate and observers to this years Conference hosted by the Malaysian Branch. In addition, the Northern Ireland Branch was invited to fulfil the role of secretary to the Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland UK devolved Branches (this role is rotational - Wales will provide the Secretary in 2009 and Scotland in 2010). The Northern Ireland Assembly was also represented at the 45th Society of Clerks-at-the-Table in Commonwealth Parliaments meeting in Malaysia which runs in parallel with the Plenary Conference. Mr Paul Carlisle, Committee Clerk, attended.

The theme for this year’s Plenary Conference was ‘Expanding the Role of Parliament in Global Society: Environment, Development and Security.’ The format, which is determined by the Executive Committee of CPA in discussion with the host branch, involved an Opening Ceremony, Regional Group Meetings, a Cultural Day, 8 Themed Workshops, 2 specific Plenary Sessions and a meeting of the General Assembly of the CPA. Several other networking type functions were also held outside of the main sessions.

The Conference was attended by over 600 parliamentarians from all 9 regions of the Commonwealth, with 50 countries and over 160 parliaments and legislatures represented. The range and diversity of the cultures represented was considerable with the conference providing a unique opportunity for parliamentarians across the Commonwealth to learn about the strengths and indeed challenges of democratic governance.

Official Opening - Tuesday 5th August 2008

Prior to the official opening ceremony BIMR delegates were invited to breakfast with the British High Commissioner to Malaysia, Boyd McCleary CVO. Mr McCleary is from Northern Ireland having worked in the Department of Agriculture at Dundonald House before joining the FCO in 1975. During his presentation Mr McCleary talked about his work on representing British policies in Malaysia and more specifically the strong links existing between Malaysia and the UK’s educational establishments notably Queens University, Belfast. He added that three of the current Malaysian Ministers had graduated from QUB.

The official opening ceremony took place at the Conference Venue, the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre on Tuesday 5th August 2008. The opening address was given by the Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia (in the absence of the PM), Dato’ Sri Najib Tun Ruzak. YB Tan Sri Datuk Pandikar Amin bin Haji Mulia, Speaker of the House of Representatives and President of the Malaysia Branch of the CPA also addressed the delegates. A message was conveyed to the Conference on behalf of Queen Elizabeth II, Patron of the Association.
After lunch Members of the Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland delegations attended a BIMR Regional meeting. Each delegate leader was asked to give an update on Branch activity since the BIMR regional conference in Gibraltar in May 2008. Mr O’Loan reported on the Northern Ireland position. Support and interest for the conflict resolution conference to be hosted by the Northern Ireland Branch in Spring 2009 was recorded. The remainder of the business was a general report of UK Branch/BIMR activities and a report on financial positions. One contentious issue involved a request by the Secretary General of the CPA based in London, to be provided with living accommodation. No final decisions have been made however the proposal did prompt some lively debate by the regional committee.

Following the regional meetings the full conference resumed, to be given an address by the CPA Secretary-General and the Commonwealth Secretary-General. A book presentation was made by the editor of the publication ‘Parliaments as Peacebuilders in Conflict Affected-Countries’ Mitchell O’Brien, from the World Bank Institute, to Dr William F. Shija, Secretary General CPA. The book, a copy of which will be made available in the Assembly Library includes a chapter written by the former Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly Lord Alderdice entitled ‘Creating a Shared Parliament in a Divided Society: Lessons from the Northern Ireland Experience.’

**Wednesday 6th August 2008**

NI Branch members accompanied by the Secretary attended a cultural day organised by the host branch. This involved a very early start, long journeys by coach with highly organised police motorcycle escorts and witnessing first hand the logistical challenges associated with managing 800 people from so many cultures. Delegates reached Taman Mini Malaysia where they were welcomed with a traditional Malay wedding ceremony and entertained with traditional games. They were also served interesting local delicacies. Lunch was hosted by the Chief Minister of Malacca Hon. Dato’ Seri Mohd Ali Rustam. After lunch delegates had a tour of the historical city of Malacca.

Mr O’Loan attended an evening reception hosted by the British High Commissioner.

**Thursday 8th August 2008**

There were four separate workshops. The Northern Ireland delegation decided to split these up to gain maximum benefit.

**Workshop A**  Democracy and Global Peace - an International Order.

At this workshop a range of discussion leaders presented views about how Democracy and Peace should be integrated as part of an international order to achieve global peace. Workshop participants agreed that all commercial, financial, industrial and scientific activities that aid and abet war should be criminalised. Furthermore
parliaments, in the role of linking government and people, should recognise the core responsibility to settle conflicts peacefully. Parliaments should act as the eyes and ears of the executives.

**Workshop B**  
Sustainable Development in the Context of Rapid Urbanisation and Rural Decline.

Urbanisation, urban poverty and climate change are linked. Challenges to sustainable urbanisation include poor planning, poor implementation, and managing capabilities by local government and their partners. Urbanisation is linked to economic development and there is a need to recognise and manage the correlation between urbanisation and climate change.

**Workshop C**  
Credible Elections for a more Representative Parliament, Free and Fair Participation, Greater Diversity and access to a Free Media.

This session discussed credible elections, representative parliament, free and fair participation, greater diversity and access to a free media in the context of Commonwealth nations. The workshop drew up recommendations around the areas of domestic observer group assistance, Commonwealth election observation and new approaches to deepening democracy within the Commonwealth. The key role of the Commonwealth in overseeing election processes was widely recognised.

**Workshop D**  
Reforming the Budget Process: Parliamentary Budget Offices and Effective Parliamentary Oversight.

This workshop discussed the role PBO’s played in ensuring that the legislature and the public fully understood the spending plans and priorities of the executive. PBO’s were becoming an increasingly popular option for legislatures as they allowed elected representatives to present the budget to interest groups for example farmers or manufacturers at a local level. PBO structure, discrimination, bureaucracy and demand from MP’s all needed to be carefully considered before such an office was established in a legislature.

Mr O’Loan attended Workshop A, Mr Gardiner attended Workshop B, Mr Cree attended Workshop C, Mr Gregg attended Workshop D.

Late afternoon all delegates were invited to a tour of Parliament House, the Parliament of Malaysia. The tour included visits to both the Senate and the House of Representatives.
Friday 9th August 2008

There were four workshops held as follows –

**Workshop E**  Collaboration among Large and Small states through International Organisations to respond to Climate Change.


**Workshop G**  Role of Parliament in Conflict Prevention and Resolution

**Workshop H**  Mechanism to ensure Adequate Recognition of Women’s Issues in Budgetary Processes.

Summaries of the outcomes of Workshops E, F and H can be found on the conference website [www.cpa-conference.org](http://www.cpa-conference.org).

Workshop G was attended by all Northern Ireland Branch members. Mr O’Loan attended as discussion leader, giving a key address at the start of the session, and Mr Gregg was rapporteur. This well attended and lively workshop looked at the role of parliamentarians and parliaments as the most appropriate institutions to address conflict prevention and resolution. This role was critical given the current volatile situations that existed around the world including Commonwealth member countries. It was noted that more Commonwealth members than ever are seeking assistance to resolve domestic conflict and ease tensions. This was emphasised more specifically through examples given by delegates from Papua New Guinea and Sierra Leone.

In the afternoon Northern Ireland Branch members attended a plenary session entitled ‘The Global Food Crisis.’ Across the world the crisis and its repercussions are causing chaos as food shortages worsen and prices rise. Non food production, for example palm oil in Malaysia or demands for cotton and tobacco elsewhere are driving farmers away from using the best agricultural land for food production. Delegates heard a detailed briefing on the Malaysia stand on the food crisis, what programmes are being undertaken by the government there to ease the situation and suggestions about what could be done by the Commonwealth and more widely.

Saturday 10th August 2008

All Northern Ireland Branch members attended the CPA General Assembly that included the election of the new Chairperson of the Executive Committee. The Northern Ireland Branch had agreed to support the nomination of Lord Paul of Marylebone to this role. The other nomination was Malaysian Culture Minister Shafie Apdal. As the delegate Mr O’Loan cast a vote on behalf of the NI Branch. Apdal polled 152 votes while Lord Paul secured 102. While Apdal
was backed by the Indian delegation Lord Paul was a nominee of the UK and Canada. Apdal is the third parliamentarian from a Southeast Asian nation to head the CPA.

In the afternoon the final plenary was held titled *The Communications Challenge for Parliament: Meeting the Information Needs of Members and the Public*. Members attended this and the subsequent closing ceremony.

**Other activities**

Delegates attended other dinner events and lunches during the week. Sufficient time was set aside for networking with other CPA members at these events and arguably some of the most important discussions took place on these informal occasions.

**Conclusion**

For all three Northern Ireland Branch Members this was their first time attending the CPA’s Annual Conference. One of the less tangible benefits of attending is the access it provides to parliamentarians across the Commonwealth, emphasising the challenges that many parliaments face in grappling with very similar issues to Northern Ireland’s both domestically and further afield. The Malaysian hosts were very hospitable and generous. It is recommended that the Branch should continue to send representation to future conferences possibly one delegate and one observer only, to minimise costs, and at the same time rotating opportunities to attend amongst as many interested Branch members possible.

The 2009 plenary Conference will be hosted by the Tanzanian Branch.

Mr Declan O’Loan MLA
Mr Sam Gardiner MLA
Mr Leslie Cree MLA

Peter Gregg
(Secretary to Northern Ireland, Scotland & Wales Delegations)

August 2008