As my first Commonwealth Parliamentary Assembly experience I found the Canadian seminar extremely interesting and informative. The whole week was made enjoyable by the secretariat’s meticulous organisation and the warm and welcoming hospitality from our Canadian hosts.

Seminars of particular interest and use from my perspective were:

Senator David Smith on financing elections.

Chris Alexander MP on Democracy, Human Rights and Development

Engaging Citizens: Resources and Tools by Ed Holder MP and Dr Carolyn Bennett MP.

Current debates in Canada were relevant and interesting.

Abolishing the Senate

There is a debate running on whether the unelected Senate should be abolished. This has parallels to debate in the UK over the House of Lords, on which, of course, the Canadian senate is modelled.

Questions over where this debate is emanating from – the media, political elites, or from ridings (constituencies) intrigued me. We have to have mind to people’s priorities and what affects their lives. This is an important touchpoint in all jurisdictions. Whether the Senate abolition is a priority for the voters in Canada seems to still be open to question.

An interesting point was made by one Senator about the role of the Senate to represent minorities, because the House of Commons will always represent majorities given the first past the post system in the constituencies.

Quebec referendum

Reflections on the Quebec referendum were interesting for me given the current debate in Scotland. However, no clear picture emerged from the various politicians I spoke to about what had happened, what had motivated the movement and the results. It served as a reminder that nationalist movements and secession votes are complicated, motivated by many different factors, and will perhaps always bubble
under the surface of democratic politics until there is a vacuum for them to come to the fore.

Gender representation

The issue of gender representation came up again and again throughout the seminar. Over 80% of participants were male.

The ANC reported that they are committed to 50 50 representation throughout all of their structures. I don't know however if they achieve this target.

Caucuses

Our discussion on caucuses intrigued me. It was extremely interesting to hear people’s views on the role of the caucus and good practice within it. A summary I liked was that "the caucus is the leader's bellweather. It is the bridge between the leader and the people."

Age

A few of us at the seminar were around the same age and getting to grips with their new role as a public representative. It was extremely useful for me to hear their experiences and priorities and compare them with my own.

Networking

The networking opportunities were some of the most valuable sessions, allowing me the opportunity I wanted from the seminar to meet politicians from different countries, hear their experiences, challenges, how they do their work, and relate it back to my own experience in Scotland. I made contacts that I feel will last beyond the trip, new contacts on social media that are useful to follow to maintain the international perspective throughout my working week.

Overall the seminar was extremely valuable for me and an opportunity to take stock on priorities two years after my election to Parliament. I would like to thank the Scottish branch of the CPA for selecting me for the seminar. I hope I can participate in any events in the Scottish Parliament where my experience might be useful to other colleagues or visitors.