53RD COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE, NEW DELHI, INDIA

Friday 21 September to Sunday 30 September 2007

THEME: “DELIVERING DEMOCRACY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT”.

CONFERENCE REPORT

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Background

The Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) mission is to ‘promote the advancement of parliamentary democracy by enhancing knowledge and understanding of democratic governance and by building an informed parliamentary community, able to deepen the Commonwealth’s democratic commitment and to further co-operation among its Parliaments and Legislatures’. The Association is composed of around 170 parliaments and legislatures in 50 of the 53 Commonwealth nations.

This year’s conference, the 53rd Annual Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference was hosted by the India Branch of the CPA. The conference was held in the city of New Delhi. The CPA Annual Conference is organised by the CPA Secretariat in London and the local host branch. More than 700 Parliamentarians, parliamentary officials and accompanying persons attended the conference.

Each of the UK’s devolved parliaments and assemblies has established a local branch of the CPA. All three branches are within the CPA British Isles and Mediterranean Region (BIMR). Each of the three UK devolved branches is entitled to send one delegate to the CPA Annual Conference plus additional Members as observers.

Mohammad Asghar AM and Alun Cairns AM represented the Wales Branch. Rosemary Butler AM attended as an observer and to represent Wales at the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Conference. Jamie Stone MSP represented the Scotland Branch as CPA Executive Committee Member and leader of delegation and Margaret Mitchell MSP as the delegate. The Northern Ireland Assembly Branch is currently in abeyance however Rev Dr Robert Coulter MLA, Stephen Moutray MLA and Joe Reynolds Deputy Clerk attended as observers.

By convention the secretary to accompany the delegation is rotated between the three legislatures. The Scottish Parliament provided a member of staff, Margaret Neal, Secretary to Scotland Branch, to fulfil this role. Paul Grice, Clerk/Chief Executive of the Scottish Parliament also attended the conference to attend the meeting of the Society of Clerks held within the programme of events.

Acknowledgements

The delegates wish to record their appreciation for the hospitality offered by the India Branch of the CPA and acknowledge the work of the host branch and the CPA Secretariat in co-ordinating the conference programme.

Aim

This report intends to provide a brief summary of the conference and to highlight contributions made to the proceedings by delegates from Scotland and Wales. More detailed information concerning this conference including the programme, supporting papers, transcripts of the principal addresses, and summary reports of the plenary debates and workshops are available at the CPA website http://www.cpahq.org
Conference Programme

The main conference programme of plenary sessions and workshops ran from Tuesday 25 September 2007 to Friday 28 September. The Conference was held in the Vigyan Bhawan. The CPA Executive Committee met 3 times, on Saturday 22, Sunday 23 September and Monday 24 September. The Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Conference took place on Monday 24 September and the Regional meetings were arranged on Tuesday 25 September.

Saturday 22 – 25 September

CPA Executive Committee

Jamie Stone MSP attended the Executive Committee meetings held during the period 22 September to 24 September. There were three matters to report. The International Executive Committee discussed the appointment of a new trustee for the CPA to replace Lord Foulkes of Cumnock who was to step down as one of the three trustees. In the past, the International Executive Committee had appointed the third trustee, but during its recent meetings had declined to appoint Mrs Cheryl Gillan MP, from the UK. A further issue arose given that some members were of the view that employees of an organisation should not be a trustee of its funds. The Secretary-General, who is an employee, is also currently one of the trustees. The nomination issue would be discussed at the mid-year meeting in Jersey in April 2008 and it was thought that a sub-committee would be formed to consider the trustee nomination process. Mrs Clare Christian MLC (Regional Representative, Isle of Man) would be likely to serve on that sub-committee.

The CPA Secretary-General had commissioned a management consultant’s report on staffing issues at the mid-year meeting of the International Executive Committee in Cyprus in April 2007. The report had been laid before the International Executive Committee at its recent meetings where heated discussions had covered the quality and funding of the report. Apparently neither the Treasurer nor the Secretariat staff had been involved in claims that £300K could be saved from staffing costs with no redundancies. This issue was further discussed at the British Islands and Mediterranean Regional Meeting which took place on Tuesday 25 September.

A short meeting of the new International Executive Committee also took place following the General Assembly on Friday 28 September. Alun Cairns AM represented Wales Branch at that meeting as Wales Branch were next on the rota to fill the position, as the Scotland Branch term of office as one of the 3 BIMR Regional Representatives ended following the General Assembly. There was one matter to report. Tan Sri Dato Seri Di Raja Ramli Ngah Talib, Speaker of the House of Representatives, Malaysia was elected President of the CPA. This had come as a welcome surprise as there had been no indication that this member would be seeking this position.
High Commissioner of Pakistan Reception

Members of the Scottish, Welsh and UK delegations were invited to attend a reception hosted by the High Commissioner of Pakistan at his residence. This invitation gave the members an opportunity to meet with Pakistani parliamentarians and other members of the diplomatic community in an informal and relaxed setting to discuss topics of mutual interest.

Monday 24 September

Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Conference

Rosemary Butler AM and Margaret Mitchell MSP, attended the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Conference on Monday 24 September in New Delhi, India.

The Speaker of the Lok Sabha, Shri Somnath Chatterjee inaugurated the CWP conference. The President of the CWP, Smt. Renuka Chaudhary, and Ms Lindiwe Chairperson of CWP also addressed the gathering. The CWP was spread over 2 sessions. These were “Strategies to Overcome Barriers Preventing Women's Participation in Decision – Making” and “The Role of Women Parliamentarians in dealing with HIV/AIDS and Poverty Reduction”. Both Members overall enjoyed the Conference and found the content relevant, interesting and of immense personal benefit in their current positions within their own jurisdictions. Both Members recommended that women Members from the devolved legislatures should be given the opportunity to attend the CWP Conferences in the future. For information The Commonwealth has set a target of having 30 per cent of seats occupied by women by 2015 in all legislatures.

The UNDP also delivered a presentation on iknow politics which provides a global platform where women politicians can reach beyond partisanship and borders to share experiences, offer support and enhance their capacity to lead.

Following the Conference sessions the election of the Chairperson of CWP took place. The election of the Chairperson of the CWP caused some consternation amongst the delegates. The election process may have been marred slightly by the rules for the election of the Chairperson of the CWP not being strictly adhered to. Rule 7 (d) (iii) was not applied in the case of the tie between the 2 candidates in the ballot with the lowest number of votes. Although this may not have affected the final outcome it was a cause of concern to a number of the delegates. This matter was not debated at the time mainly due to the fact that Conference had overrun by several hours and some of the delegates may not have fully understood the rules as this was the first time that this conference had been held and therefore the first time delegates were able to vote for the Chairperson.
The voting process of 73 people had taken 2½ hours. It seems likely that the rules and ballot will be reviewed by the CWP Steering Committee to ensure that a similar situation is avoided in the future.

UK High Commission Briefing.

Representatives from the British Isles and Mediterranean Region of the CPA were provided with an introductory briefing on India by the UK High Commissioner. Delegates were briefed on governance at the federal and state levels and economic development. Rosemary Butler AM, and Margaret Mitchell MSP were unable to attend this briefing due to the CWP election running over the allocated time. Mohammad Asghar AM, Alun Cairns AM and Jamie Stone MSP did attend.

Tuesday 25 September

Opening Ceremony

The President of India, Smt. Pratibha Devisigh Patil addressed delegates at the Opening Ceremony which was held in Vigyan Bhawan. The President said India had unwaivering faith in democratic governance as the best way to ensure sustainable development and to promote the advancement of human rights, and especially the rights of women, in an interconnected world. She said Commonwealth Parliamentarians working together can send a powerful message to the world to resolve issues collectively. This address was followed by Indian Vice-President Shri Mohammad Hamid Ansari who recalled that India’s first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru said Commonwealth countries share a bond and an affinity that can today be mobilized to promote peace, freedom, democracy and sustainable development around the world. A message from HM The queen Elizabeth II was also read out to delegates during the ceremony.

Briefing about the Commonwealth

Dr William Shija Secretary-General of the CPA Secretariat briefed delegates about the CPA and set out hopes and aspirations for the future. Following this, Don McKinnon Secretary General of the Commonwealth addressed Members. His address included a tribute to Ghandi which was appropriate given that 2007 is the 60th anniversary of Indian Independence as well as a briefing about the current state of the Commonwealth. Alun Cairns AM from Wales Branch asked the Secretary General what the Commonwealth was doing to support democracy in Zimbabwe and what could parliamentarians do to help the Commonwealth in this role. The Secretary General responded by saying that attempts to improve the situation from African organisations and international organisations had failed. President Mbeki was assisting. He concluded by saying that he felt that Zimbabwe would come back into the Commonwealth at some point in the future.
British Islands and Mediterranean Regional Meeting

The meeting was chaired by Jamie Stone MSP. The Chair welcomed the return of Northern Ireland Branch which was further endorsed by every Branch during the course of the meeting. The 3 BIMR Regional representatives reported back on the discussions that had taken place during the course of the International Executive Committee. The staffing issues at CPA Secretariat in particular, seemed to be a cause of concern for the BIMR Regional Representatives. The discussion covered employment and legal matters, management responsibilities and the previous employment issue regarding the former Secretary General which had cost the CPA £150K.

Margaret Mitchell MSP gave the report for Scotland Branch. Topics included the change of the political landscape in Scotland following the elections in May 2007 the 19th Commonwealth Parliamentary Seminar which Scotland Branch would host in October 2007, An update on the Scotland Malawi relationship and the continuing engagement between Scotland Branch and other Commonwealth legislatures under the auspices of CPA.

Wales Branch contributed along similar lines and Alun Cairns AM reported on progress with their relationship with Lesotho. Work study visits between Committee Clerks had taken place.

Kate Hoey MP gave a report about the CWP and suggested that the CWP election process may need to be reviewed in light of the difficulties which had arisen during the ballot process for the election of the Chairperson on CWP.

Branches were requested to respond to the frequent requests for feedback from the Secretariat to enable the International Executive Committee to gauge the feelings of the Branch memberships.

The BIMR Annual Conference will be held in Gibraltar from 12-15 May 2008.

In his closing remarks, Jamie Stone MSP referred to the contribution Scotland Branch had made to the International committee over the past 3 years and referred to the contributions made by his predecessors Dr Sylvia Jackson and the late Margaret Ewing.

Wednesday 26 September

The working day was devoted to a series of Workshops. The delegates organised themselves to ensure as far as possible the 3 workshops were covered. The workshops were:

**Workshop A**  Climate Change and Global Warming: Policy Issues and Solutions

**Workshop B**  Global Water and Energy Use – Towards Sustainable Development

**Workshop C**  Balancing Economic Development and Environmental Protection
Jamie Stone MSP attended Workshop A, Rosemary Butler AM and Mohammad Asghar AM attended Workshop B, Margaret Mitchell attended Workshop C and Alun Cairns AM attended all three.

In the afternoon, the delegates were given the opportunity to visit historical places including Humayun’s tomb, the Nehru Memorial and the Lotus Temple. A visit to the National Museum was also on offer.

UK High Commission Reception

The UK Deputy High Commissioner hosted a reception for delegates, High Commission staff and local community representatives at the High Commissioner’s Residence.

Thursday 27 September

The working day was devoted to a plenary on “The Role of Parliamentarians in Raising Awareness Of and Curbing Human Trafficking”. Parliamentarians took back the message that all parliamentarians had a specific role to play by ensuring all countries ratify protocols on Human Trafficking, ensure that laws are in place to deal with this issue and to ensure that the issue is regularly on the parliamentary agenda.

A series of 3 workshops were also arranged:

**Workshop D**  Parliamentary Practice and Procedure: Need for Reforms to Secure Greater Executive Accountability.
**Workshop E**  The Role, Rights and Responsibilities of the Opposition
**Workshop F**  Strengthening Financial Scrutiny

Members from Wales and Scotland made a number of contributions to proceedings. Jamie Stone MSP led the discussion at workshop F which was well attended with many interesting contributions made.

Rosemary Butler AM and Alun Cairns AM attended Workshop D, Margaret Mitchell MSP attended Workshop E and Mohammad Asghar AM attended Workshop F.

Paul Grice, Margaret Neal, the Speaker and Clerk of the National Assembly of Malawi met with the Secretary General outwith the conference programme to discuss the Technical Assistance Project between Scotland and Malawi which is being funded by the CPA.
**Friday 28 September**

**General Assembly**

The General Assembly Meeting of the CPA was held in the morning. The highlight of the General Assembly for the UK and devolved legislatures was that a motion was passed to ratify the re-admittance of Northern Ireland Branch. The Members from Scotland and Wales were the first to congratulate their Northern Ireland counterparts.

Delegates were advised that the CPA had applied to the DfID GTF for funding for 5 years to enhance the organisation’s capacity to strengthen parliamentary democracy.

The General Assembly agreed that the CPA Annual Conference would be held in Malaysia in 2008, the Parliament of Ghana agreed to host the Conference in 2010 and the UK Branch re-affirmed their commitment to host in 2011. There were no offers to host the 2009 Annual Conference.

Delegates were informed that membership fees would increase by 3.9% from 2008.

The delegates also discussed the International Executive Committee and CPA staffing issues. The main points of the discussion included suggestions for more consensual, open and transparent decision making, improved information to Branches about proposed changes. A working group had been established to oversee reforms and monitor the work of the CPA Secretariat.

All other relevant business was endorsed.

Business continued with the plenary session “Right to Recall”. The plenary was stimulating with much interaction raising issues such as the effects of diversion of financial resources from other areas and the potential for misuse of the powers. The topic enabled parliamentarians to explore the topic and hopefully to have a better perspective of the issue.

The final plenary of the Conference “Benchmarks for Democratic Legislatures” raised some interesting points such as benchmarks could help legislatures become more open, independent, responsible and accountable. It was suggested that benchmarks should be reviewed at regional level and as a framework for continuous gathering and updating of information about best practises in parliaments.

The conference ended with a farewell reception and dinner hosted by The Speaker of the Lok Sabah, Shri Somnath Chatterjee.
Saturday 29 September

Cultural Tour

A full day was spent on a cultural programme. Delegates were taken by coach and train to Agra and the Taj Mahal around three hours from New Delhi. This day visit was very informative in providing an opportunity to leave the confines of hotel and conference rooms thereby gaining some direct experience and contrast between the levels of development and infrastructure within and away from the capital. Many of the delegates were shocked by the scenes of poverty witnessed along the railway tracks on the way to Agra. The rail track was lined with people living in makeshift housing alongside their livestock with no electricity or running water. The visit to the Taj Mahal was splendid and deserves its reputation.

Conclusion

Members were reminded that they must sensitise the public to the need for measures to reduce poverty, enhance respect for the rights of women, minimize the effects of pollution on the environment, including global water supplies, and resolve pressing issues as human trafficking. They also heard how parliamentarians should use existing parliamentary procedures and adopt new processes to hold governments to account for the effectiveness of their policies.

The conference provided a valuable opportunity for those attending from the Scottish Parliament and the National Assembly for Wales to meet fellow parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth, to discuss matters of common interest informally and to contribute to proceedings in both workshop and plenary sessions. The conference also provided delegates the opportunity to deepen their understanding of and the challenges it faces in deepening its democratic structures.

Attendance at this conference enabled both the Scottish and Welsh delegations to meet with counterparts from Malawi and Lesotho to re-inforce their relationships and discuss areas of mutual interest.