



Report of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

2023 Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments

London, United Kingdom

March 13 to 17, 2023

Report

Ms. Iqra Khalid, MP, Vice-Chair of the Branch, and Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau, MP, attended the 2023 Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments on behalf of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) in London, United Kingdom (UK) from March 13 to 17, 2023.

Participants at this seminar included 65 delegates who were either parliamentarians or clerks from 28 Commonwealth countries.

PURPOSE

The annual Westminster Seminar is CPA UK's flagship capacity-building program. Held at the UK Parliament, the seminar was aimed at parliamentarians and parliamentary officials who are relatively new to their role. It was designed to provide a highly participatory forum for delegates to exchange ideas on parliamentary practice and procedure as well as share wider experiences of how legislatures across the Commonwealth function.

OBJECTIVE

The objective of the seminar was for delegates to gain a better understanding of how to effectively scrutinize, represent and deliver oversight in their parliaments.

Output 1: Delegates will have an opportunity to widen their networks, creating open communication lines to work collaboratively with their peers.

Output 2: Delegates will be introduced to knowledge, tools and skills to enhance their leadership and administrative role in their respective legislatures.

Output 3: Delegates will gain a deeper understanding of the components that make up an effective parliament, using examples from across the Commonwealth, including the UK.

Specific Topics Discussed

- The Role and Powers of the Speaker
- Parliamentary Systems Across the Commonwealth
- Ensuring Representation and Diversity in Parliaments
- Privilege & Conduct: Standards, Behaviour & Etiquette
- Separation of Powers - Parliament and the Executive
- Holding the Government or Prime Minister to Account
- Leadership and Communication Skills
- Parliament and the Digital Space
- Conducting an Inquiry - Best Practice
- Committee Hearing Exercises
- Using Parliamentary Resources Effectively
- Engaging with the Public and Policymakers from a Committee Perspective

SUMMARY

Both delegates had the opportunity to learn about the procedures and practices currently in place in Westminster's Parliament and discuss different challenges faced by Commonwealth parliamentarians. The two delegates found it especially valuable to learn

more about the key differences between Canadian and Westminster rules of debate and the structural differences in committee. They played an active role in the discussions and in exchanging best practices during the rigorous discussions that took place throughout the program.

There were also opportunities to experience the work of the UK Parliament in practice; delegates observed Prime Minister's Questions and visited constituencies of UK MPs.

Day One

The program began on Commonwealth Day, which celebrates the diversity, unity and shared values of the Commonwealth. Delegates got to know each other while attending Commonwealth Day celebrations including the Commonwealth flag-raising ceremony at the invitation of the Rt. Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP, Speaker of the UK House of Commons, and the Commonwealth service in Westminster Abbey, attended by His Majesty King Charles III and other members of the royal family.

The first day also introduced participants to the objectives of the program and the wider importance of pan-Commonwealth exchange. In her 'Keynote Address', the Rt. Hon. Dame Maria Miller, MP, Chair of CPA UK's Executive Committee, highlighted the seminar's overarching goal of experience sharing and emphasized the powerful benefits of global peer-to-peer learning. Observing that these are challenging times globally, the UK's Shadow Foreign Secretary, the Rt. Hon. David Lammy, MP, noted that there is "a massive opportunity with the Commonwealth's size and unity of vision to disentangle some of the problems faced."

Day Two

On the second day of the program, delegates attended four focused sessions on the different structures and systems that ensure parliaments across the Commonwealth function effectively. While this day highlighted the challenges faced by legislatures, there was also a focus on future positive change.

Impartiality of the Speaker of Parliament/Presiding Officer

Through group discussion between legislatures of similar sizes, delegates analyzed the speaker's function and compared experiences between their respective parliaments and systems. The ability of the speaker to be impartial was deemed to be crucial to gaining the confidence of all parliamentarians in the House. Sharing the UK's perspective, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP, observed that the Speaker of the House of Commons is selected and scrutinized on their ability to ensure equal contributions in the chamber and protect all MPs. While this resonated with some legislatures, others noted that this was not the practice in their parliaments.

Promoting diversity and representation in parliament

Delegates noted that in certain regions of the Commonwealth various previously marginalized ethnic communities were now included to achieve greater representation in parliament. However, most legislatures still face an under-representation of women parliamentarians. This is sometimes impacted by the digital sphere and social media. In the UK, for example, Dame Maria Miller, MP, noted that 83% of women report that social media makes them less likely to stand for election to parliament. Ultimately, delegates

agreed that they have an important role to play in addressing the challenges of abuse of the digital space and under-representation in parliament. The Hon. Diana Gamage, MP, from the Parliament of Sri Lanka remarked that “parliament is uniquely placed to champion diversity with ripple effects on wider society.”

The purpose of a parliamentary code of conduct

Delegates also examined behaviour standards in the parliamentary context, noting the successes, limitations and enforcement in their legislatures. The UK House of Commons’ Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, Mr. Daniel Greenberg CB, drew attention to the ‘skewed public perception’ in the UK of commitments to parliamentary standards. He suggested that, while the media keenly focus on instances of parliamentary misconduct and the breaking of standards, the reality is that most UK members of parliament firmly commit to them.

Delegates remarked that some legislatures either lacked a code of conduct or had one that was not enforced. The Hon. Rebecca Stephens, MLA, Acting Speaker in the Parliament of Western Australia, highlighted that her legislature’s lower house had a code of conduct but that more could be done to ensure parliamentarians were aware of it.

The necessity of a complaint mechanism

Delegates discussed the importance of an independent body to regulate challenging behaviours. It was noted that parliamentarians, unlike parliamentary officials, have no employer to answer to. Jo Willows, Head of the Independent Complaints and Grievances Scheme (ICGS) at the UK Parliament, acknowledged the UK’s own issues with bullying and harassment and explained that the IGCS had sought to hold UK members to account for their behaviour since its conception in 2017.

Day Three

The predominant focus of day three was the nature of relationships in a parliamentary setting. This included discussion of the working relationships between institutions of the state, communicating to critique and influence and accountability in an age of mass media.

Holding power to account

Delegates explored the mechanisms used in legislatures across the Commonwealth to ensure governments are held accountable for their policies and actions. The Hon. Ahasunal Islam Titu from the Parliament of Bangladesh drew attention to the important part committees play in scrutinizing the government, emphasizing the role of the Public Accounts Committee in regulating transparency and analyzing the spending of government departments.

Engaging public questions

Delegates noted the importance of public scrutiny. Some attended Prime Minister’s Questions (PMQs) as observers and others watched the live broadcast, with commentary on the structure, content and procedures provided by an experienced UK parliamentary official. Chris Elmore, MP, remarked that, although PMQs is more theatre than genuine debate on policy or general issues, it nonetheless serves as an example of the prime minister engaging with the public and political discourse.

Effective communication and leadership skills for parliamentarians

The parliamentarians explored ways to achieve the greatest impact as a public figure, through conscious and context-led communication techniques. Ginny Radmall (Founder, The Ivy Way) encouraged parliamentarians to consider the subtle ways they can enhance their engagement both in the chamber and in their constituency. These ranged from adapting one's body language during debates to distilling complex information to constituents.

Day Four

On the fourth day, delegates discussed the role of parliament as a legislative and scrutiny body. Delegates highlighted the importance of committee work in this context but recognized that committees across the Commonwealth often face similar issues that can inhibit their effectiveness. These include the challenge of reaching a timely cross-party consensus, managing backlogs exacerbated by the global pandemic and ensuring recommendations are followed up and acted on by the government.

Enhancing committee knowledge and skills

Delegates were invited to join one of two committee exercises, one focusing on 'Trafficking through Sport' and the other on the 'Role of Social Media in Conflict.' These exercises offered delegates the chance to roleplay as a committee, with the guidance of a freeze-frame facilitator, to enhance or share their knowledge on questioning techniques while demonstrating them in practice. Delegates also noted minor differences in technicalities depending on their legislatures; for example, some required witnesses to swear an oath that they would tell the truth before giving evidence to a committee.

Supporting witnesses

Mark Earl, Safeguarding and Witness Support Lead at the UK House of Commons, highlighted the importance of risk assessments and private preparatory meetings with witnesses in the lead up to an inquiry. Delegates noted the particular importance of supporting witnesses considered vulnerable, through disability or traumatic lived experience. While their input can prove impactful and beneficial for key issues, the pressure on such witnesses can lead to potential mental harm and emotionally charged information.

Communicating the work of a committee

Delegates shared good practice in preparing for committee work and disseminating key findings to the public and policymakers. Communicating the work of a committee to the public was identified as an area where legislatures had experienced challenges. From public interest to accessibility, committees across the Commonwealth found it difficult to communicate the impact and importance of their work. The Hon. Mikael Phillips, Chairman of Jamaica's Public Administration and Appropriations Committee, stressed the importance of actively broadcasting sittings. He shared the experience of his legislature, which consists of several rural parishes, where sittings are both televised and available on the radio.

Day Five

The Work of Parliamentarians and Parliamentary Officials in Practice

The final day of the program was an opportunity for delegates to immerse themselves in the practicalities of working in the UK Parliament. Parliamentarians visited UK MPs in their constituency and gained first-hand insight into how they engage with constituents and organize their constituency work as well as the more informal day-to-day activities of UK parliamentarians outside the Houses of Parliament.

In conclusion, the delegates of the CPA Canadian Branch would like to thank CPA UK for hosting this seminar and the Library of Parliament for helping produce the necessary background material.

Respectfully submitted,

Ms. Alexandra Mendès, MP

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

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
ACTIVITY	2023 Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments
DESTINATION	London, United Kingdom
DATES	March 13 to 17, 2023
DELEGATION	
SENATE	
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Iqra Khalid Marie-Hélène Gaudreau
STAFF	
TRANSPORTATION	\$ 6,072.92
ACCOMMODATION	\$ 4,796.49
HOSPITALITY	\$ 0.00
PER DIEMS	\$ 2,271.05

OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$ 0.00
MISCELLANEOUS	\$ 970.21
TOTAL	\$ 14,110.67