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**Report of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth  
Parliamentary Association**

**72<sup>nd</sup> Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments**

**London, United Kingdom**

**March 11 to 15, 2024**

## Report

Ms. Alexandra Mendès, MP, Chair of the Branch, and Mr. Robert Kitchen, MP, attended the 72nd Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments on behalf of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) in London, United Kingdom (UK), from March 11 to 15, 2024.

Participants at this seminar included 65 delegates who were either parliamentarians or clerks from 27 Commonwealth jurisdictions.

### PURPOSE

The annual Westminster Seminar is CPA UK's flagship capacity-building program. Held at the UK Parliament, this year's Seminar coincided with celebrations marking the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Commonwealth, celebrating diversity, unity, and shared values of the Commonwealth. The Seminar is designed to provide a highly participatory platform for delegates to exchange ideas on parliamentary practice and procedure and draw from their experiences across the Commonwealth.

### OBJECTIVE

The objective of the seminar was for delegates to enhance their ability to effectively scrutinize, represent, and deliver oversight in their respective legislatures.

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

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

**Output 3:** Delegates gained 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 of the Speaker
- Effective Parliaments and Responsibility of Members
- Parliamentary Systems Analysis
- Democracy in Practice and Practicing Democracy
- Pressures on a Parliamentarian
- Leadership and Communication Skills
- The Role and Impact of Select Committees – Insight into Public Accounts Committees
- Holding the Prime Minister and Executive to Account
- Committee Hearings
- Members: Committee Recommendations and follow up
- Diversity and Inclusion
- Equal Right to Political Participation? Addressing Gendered Challenges in Elections
- Members: Privileges, Standards and Behaviour
- Utilizing Social Media
- Parliamentary Outreach

## **SUMMARY OF DISCUSSION**

### **1. Roles and Responsibilities**

Impartiality, leadership, and representation were highlighted as key characteristics for a successful Speaker. The Rt. Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle, Speaker of the House of Commons, and Hon. Dr. Dessima Williams, Madame President of the Grenada Senate, noted the value of Standing Orders and codes of conduct in ensuring impartiality, leadership, and appropriate behaviour amongst parliamentarians during sitting periods. Similarly, Clerks noted that Standing Orders need to be impartial and effective for advising MPs on the rules and procedures in the Chamber, as well as committees.

Representation and its importance were stressed by Speaker Hoyle. Touching upon his responsibility as an MP first and foremost, he talked about the need to create personal connections with his constituents, remaining mindful of who he was elected to represent. This was echoed by participants who accentuated the need to be attentive to the interests of constituents. Participants also emphasized the need to strike a balance between an MP's work in parliament and their constituency. Transparency was a noteworthy theme throughout the programme. Delegates discussed the connection between transparent legislatures and greater representation, noting how improved levels of transparency often coincide with greater levels of public trust and therefore help strengthen parliamentary democracy.

### **2. Strengthening Parliamentary Democracy**

Embracing technology and innovation has the potential to enhance parliamentary democracy by fostering greater engagement between the public and Members. During an interactive session, delegates were presented with case studies of successful parliamentary initiatives, which included the establishment of a hybrid parliament in Canada. In small groups, delegates identified key factors contributing to the success of these initiatives and brainstormed how similar strategies could be applied in their other contexts.

Participants identified that the adoption of advanced technology may be limited by budgetary and resource constraints. Delegates also highlighted the importance of leveraging and enhancing existing skills to streamline parliamentary processes. Additionally, concerns were raised during interactive sessions regarding the potential misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI) to disseminate misinformation and erode trust.

During the session entitled "Effective Parliaments and Responsibility of Members," which focused on sharing what makes an effective parliament and the role of parliamentarians in ensuring the functionality of their legislature, Ms. Mendès spoke about the rehabilitation and modernization of Canada's Parliamentary Precinct through the lens of effectiveness and continuity of parliamentary business. Her presentation described the roles and responsibilities taken on by parliamentarians to support the accomplishment of the project, while also highlighting that issues involving the rehabilitation and modernization of the Parliamentary Precinct and the continuity of parliamentary business illustrate the demands placed on modern parliaments to respond to their citizens' needs in constantly changing environments. This real-life example demonstrated how infrastructure,

parliamentarians and governance can be effective, resilient and adaptable to ensure the continuity and smooth operation of legislative affairs.

Ms. Mendès also chaired the session entitled “Equal Right to Political Participation? Addressing Gendered Challenges in Elections,” where delegates emphasized the need for ongoing affirmative action to strengthen the representation of women in politics and parliaments. Progressive policies that have already been implemented successfully, such as allowing family leave and reforming working environments to accommodate family-friendly schedules, were highlighted. In addition to these initiatives, the enactment of legislation plays a significant role in reaffirming women’s involvement in politics. Looking at the Senedd, one way it has furthered its ambitions is by integrating gender equality into legislation, having already achieved gender parity.

Discussions emphasized how failure to address gender-based violence in all its forms threatens the equal right to political participation. Alarming statistics were highlighted, such as 4 out of 5 female parliamentarians having experienced psychological violence. Delegates called for an end of abuse towards female politicians, highlighting the importance of not only ensuring the support and nomination of women, but the need for civil society engagement to promote gender equality.

Advocating for campaigns aimed at bolstering diversity and inclusion can enhance parliamentary democracy by improving representation and the quality of participation. Delegates had the opportunity to listen to and discuss their strategies for fostering a more welcoming and accessible environment within parliament for various segments of society, recognizing that promoting diversity and inclusion is a collective responsibility.

Holding the executive branch to account reinforces parliamentary democracy by upholding transparency, accountability, and oversight, thereby preventing the abuse of power and reinforcing adherence to the rule of law. Delegates exchanged insights into their effective methods of scrutinizing and holding their Ministers or Government accountable. Representatives from New South Wales elaborated on their distinctive “Call for Papers” authority, allowing members to request any government document for production. Additionally, they clarified that any Minister can be queried during question time, with or without prior notice, effectively avoiding delays in holding the government accountable.

Participants also noted how cross-party committees can serve as another way to hold the executive to account. Discussions underscored the vital role of accountability.

### **3. The Role and Impact of Parliamentary Committees**

Parliamentary Committees play a crucial role in holding the government accountable, ensuring transparency, oversight, and the effective scrutiny of government actions and policies. To achieve this, clerks and officials listed the importance of being impartial but not necessarily apolitical. Transparent and clear work, coupled with an understanding of political tensions when analyzing evidence, can enhance the impact of relevant suggestions.

Funding was highlighted as a possible obstacle to effective committee scrutiny. Some delegates shared their experiences regarding how their respective parliaments draft and allocate budgets between parliamentary committees. This practice often requires

balancing budgets across committees, which can restrict the actions of individual committees. Instead, delegates advocated for the committees to draft their own budgets based on the work they aim to accomplish.

Given the range of inquiries handled by parliamentary committees, determining when to revisit a topic or explore a subject more thoroughly is important. Participants discussed how regular responses and updates on ongoing policy matters could be scheduled, perhaps every six months, for better manageability by the committee.

Additionally, the Chair of the committee plays a pivotal role in encouraging members to take the lead on specific aspects of the inquiry, helping to foster member engagement. Members noted that this practice may also support effective scrutiny of government policies.

#### **4. Public Outreach and Engagement**

Parliaments across the Commonwealth have devised a range of outreach strategies and initiatives to reach less engaged stakeholders. Participants emphasized the significance of youth engagement. Delegates noted that youth engagement does not only bring unique perspectives and experiences to the political arena, but also nurtures future leaders who are informed, active, and invested in shaping their communities and societies.

Social media and other communication channels can serve as effective tools for engaging with constituents, utilized by both members and committees. Examples of their use in public engagement include:

- Reaching stakeholders of all kinds – contacting expert witnesses can be made easier.
- Postal Service agreements – an agreement between parliament and postal services can enable MPs to send postage free mail to communicate with constituents.
- Listening and sharing – understanding the platforms where the public is most active can enable you to listen to their concerns effectively. Utilizing social media can also enhance the communication of policies.

However, delegates also noted three potential barriers to social media use:

- Age inclusivity – some members of society do not use social media, which has the potential to exclude these groups.
- Volume of responses – inquiry processes may experience delays due to many submissions, especially when the team is small, and resources are limited.
- Controversy and online harassment – social media can exacerbate online violence and harassment through factors such as anonymity, viral spread, echo chambers, targeted attacks, normalization of toxic behaviour, and underreporting.

#### **5. Constituency and Educational Visits**

Members had the opportunity to attend constituency visits in both London and in Wales. In London, groups were hosted by Nickie Aiken, MP for Westminster, Rupa Huq, MP for Ealing Central and Acton, and Virendra Sharma, MP for Ealing, Southall. In Wales,

delegates were hosted by Jenny Rathbone, MS for Cardiff Central, and were met by Councillor Huw Thomas.

Each constituency visit was unique. Some delegates visited an MP's local office to discuss and compare methods of constituent support, while others explored the constituency, visiting schools and discussing local developments like community hubs.

## **CONCLUSION**

The 72<sup>nd</sup> Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments was an opportunity for Commonwealth colleagues to meet, providing a space for peer-to-peer learning to enhance their roles and further build on their understanding of the Westminster parliamentary system, and allowing parliamentarians, clerks, and officials to learn how parliaments across the Commonwealth work effectively. The programme, with some interactive, combined, and split sessions for Members and clerks, gave an opportunity for collaborative discussions and enhanced engagement, fostering a dynamic exchange of ideas and insights.

Seminar delegates explored potential solutions to shared challenges they face in their respective legislatures through a blend of contributions from participants and interactive exercises. They discussed leadership and the importance of accountability in parliaments, comparing the systems and structures of their legislatures. They also noted the importance of representing their constituents while maintaining the smooth operation of parliament.

Participants explored effective communication skills and identified good practice in fostering professional and respectful relations between parliamentarians and parliamentary officials. There were also opportunities to experience the work of the UK Parliament in practice. Delegates observed Prime Minister's Questions and visited the House of Commons Library and Education Centre, as well as a range of constituencies in both London and Cardiff.

Delegates had the opportunity to network and build deeper connections, 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.

In conclusion, the delegates from the Canadian Branch of the CPA would like to thank CPA UK for hosting this year's Seminar and the Library of Parliament for preparing the necessary background material.

Respectfully submitted,

Alexandra Mendès, M.P.

Chair of the Canadian Branch of the  
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

## **Travel Costs**

<b>ASSOCIATION</b>	Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association
<b>ACTIVITY</b>	72 <sup>nd</sup> Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments
<b>DESTINATION</b>	London, United Kingdom
<b>DATES</b>	March 11 to 15, 2024
<b>DELEGATION</b>	
SENATE	
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Robert Kitchen Alexandra Mendès
STAFF	
<b>TRANSPORTATION</b>	\$5,432.88
<b>ACCOMMODATION</b>	\$4,918.26
<b>HOSPITALITY</b>	\$0.00
<b>PER DIEMS</b>	\$2,177.20
<b>OFFICIAL GIFTS</b>	\$0.00
<b>MISCELLANEOUS</b>	\$1,022.23
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>\$13,550.57</b>