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

**67th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference**

**Sydney, Australia**

**November 3 to 8, 2024**

## Report

A delegation from the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association attended the 67th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference (CPC) of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) in Sydney, Australia, from November 3 to 8, 2024.

The Canadian Branch was represented by the following delegates:

- Ms. Alexandra Mendès, MP, Chair of the Canadian Branch and Head of Delegation;
- The Honourable Rosemary Moodie, Senator, Vice-Chair of the Canadian Branch and alternate representative on the Executive Committee;
- The Honourable Flordeliz (Gigi) Osler, Senator;
- Ms. Marie-Hélène Gaudreau, MP;
- Mr. Richard Cannings, MP;
- Mr. Andrew Lauzon, Association Secretary.

Alongside the substantive conference workshops and the CPA Executive Committee meetings, the 67th Commonwealth Parliamentary Conference also included several additional events, including the 8th Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Conference; the 40th CPA Small Branches Conference; meetings of the Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) network; and the 58th Society of Clerks-at-the-Table (SoCATT) meeting.

The unique conference brings together Speakers, Members of Parliament and parliamentary staff representing the nine regions of the CPA – Africa; Asia; Australia; British Islands and Mediterranean; Canada; Caribbean, Americas and Atlantic; India; Pacific; and Southeast Asia.

Commonwealth parliamentarians attending the 67th CPC and associated meetings recognized the Commonwealth's commitment to democracy and met under the conference theme of "Engage, Empower, Sustain: Charting the Course for Resilient Democracy." The conference, hosted by the Parliament of New South Wales and CPA New South Wales Branch, was attended by over 700 Parliamentarians and parliamentary officials from across the Commonwealth.

The CPA Executive Committee met ahead of the 67th CPC. As the alternate Canadian Branch representative on the Executive Committee, Senator Moodie attended the Executive Committee meetings held on November 4, 2024, where members discussed the CPA Status Bill, the financial statements for the Association and key governance issues.

Following his election, the new CPA Chairperson from Zambia, Hon. Dr Christopher Kalila, MP, chaired a meeting of the new CPA Executive Committee at the conclusion of the 67th CPC on November 7, 2024, at which members elected a new Vice-Chairperson and appointed new Trustees. Ms. Mendès participated in the meeting, having been elected as the Canadian Branch's new representative on the Executive Committee during the General Assembly.

## **67TH COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE: OPENING ADDRESSES**

The Vice-Patron of the CPA, Her Excellency the Honourable Margaret Beazley, AC KC, the Governor of New South Wales, delivered the opening address, urging Commonwealth Parliamentarians to work together to uphold the values of the Commonwealth. A message to conference delegates from HM King Charles III, Head of the Commonwealth and Patron of the CPA, was also read out by the CPA Vice-Patron.

Delegates were also welcomed to Sydney by the Hon. Ben Franklin, MLC, President of the New South Wales Legislative Council and CPA President (2023-2024); the Hon. Greg Piper, MP, Speaker of the New South Wales Legislative Assembly; the Hon. Chris Minns, MP and Premier of New South Wales; and Stephen Twigg, CPA Secretary-General.

## **67TH COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE: CPA OFFICER ELECTIONS**

**Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee:** During the 2024 CPA General Assembly, CPA members elected Hon. Dr Christopher Kalila, MP (Zambia), as the Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee for a three-year term. The CPA Chairperson works with the CPA Secretary-General and the CPA Headquarters Secretariat to lead the Association and to chair the CPA Executive Committee. Under CPA election rules, only delegates attending the 67th CPC could take part in the vote. The two other candidates were Hon. Dr. Zainab Gimba, MP (Nigeria) and Hon. Arthur E. Holder, MP, SC, Speaker of the House of Assembly of Barbados.

**CPA Vice-Chairperson:** The 2024 CPA General Assembly was followed by a meeting of the new CPA Executive Committee during which Hon. Carmel Sepuloni, MP, Member of the Parliament of New Zealand, was elected to the position of Vice-Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee. The position of Vice-Chairperson is for a term of one year and the holder is also a member of the CPA Co-ordinating Committee.

**CPA Small Branches Chairperson:** Members of the CPA attending the 40th CPA Small Branches Conference elected Hon. Valerie Woods, MNA, Speaker of the House of Representatives of the National Assembly of Belize, as the new CPA Small Branches Chairperson.

## **CPA GENERAL ASSEMBLY: KEY DECISIONS**

During the 67th CPC in New South Wales, Commonwealth parliamentarians attended the 2024 CPA General Assembly, which was presided over by the CPA President (2023-2024), Hon. Ben Franklin, MLC, President of the New South Wales Legislative Council, and was attended by Members from 128 CPA Branches. The CPA General Assembly, the Association's supreme authority, is constituted by delegates to the annual CPC. The CPA General Assembly also included a topical debate 'Votes vs Likes – the Role of Parliament in Strengthening Democratic Resilience in an Age of Fake News and Synthetic Media', with presenters from CPA Branches including Canada, Australia, Punjab (Pakistan), The Maldives, Wales, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, and Northern Ireland. As the Canadian representative to speak during the debate, Senator Osler reminded her fellow parliamentarians of the need to remain committed to the protection of human rights, freedom of speech and expression, and democratic resilience in

response to the challenges of the digital age, where falsified information can destabilize political institutions and undermine democratic processes.

Some of the key decisions and outcomes from the 2024 CPA General Assembly were:

- Delegates welcomed the work undertaken to enable the CPA to create a new non-charitable organization and the passage of the CPA Status Bill in the UK Parliament to legislate to recognize the CPA as 'akin to an international, interparliamentary organization'.
- Delegates approved the 2023 CPA Annual Report (including the audited Financial Statements), the CPA Membership Report, the CPA Budgets and Financial Management Reports.
- Delegates endorsed reports from the three CPA networks - the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP), the Commonwealth Parliamentarians with Disabilities (CPwD) and the CPA Small Branches.

Delegates also looked ahead to the 68th CPC being hosted by the CPA Barbados Branch and Parliament of Barbados in October 2025.

## **67TH COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARY CONFERENCE – WORKSHOPS**

**Conference theme:** “Engage, Empower, Sustain: Charting the Course for Resilient Democracy”

At the 67th CPC, delegates took part in eight learning and development workshops. The workshops provided a space for delegates to share their experiences as parliamentarians and discuss issues such as the use of Artificial Intelligence and technology; the security of MPs; ending human trafficking; combatting discrimination legislation; supporting LGBT+ and people with disabilities to participate in parliaments and engaging with Indigenous peoples.

### **Workshop A: Building Bridges: Parliamentary Frameworks for Meaningfully Engaging with Indigenous Peoples**

This workshop focused on how parliamentarians and society can establish and implement frameworks which allow for meaningful engagement with Indigenous peoples. Panelists from Australia, New Zealand and Vanuatu shared their lived experiences and professional expertise in establishing such frameworks. This included ‘The Voice’ referendum in Australia, focusing on Indigenous women in Vanuatu and New Zealand’s example of entrenching Maori rights in their Constitution and wider society. Panelists discussed the difficulties and obstacles they have faced in their fight to get the rights of Indigenous peoples and groups recognized. These were particularly pronounced in jurisdictions that do not have a foundation document, such as a constitution, which expressly acknowledges the existence of Indigenous peoples and their rights. For example, the two Australian panelists reflected on their journey to set up ‘The Voice’ and constitutionally recognize Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This ultimately failed despite being an exercise deeply rooted in community engagement and consultation.

This contrasted with the New Zealand experience in recent years, where it has successfully established a Maori health authority, a national Maori holiday and specific Maori local government seats. However, the panelists also warned about the dangers of introducing change through legislation only, as there is a risk it will be dismantled by a

new government with a different political agenda. Other obstacles included navigating societal and cultural norms, as well as pushback from parts of the community who believed that granting rights or benefits to Indigenous peoples was 'racist'.

At the end of the session, workshop participants endorsed the recommendation that parliamentarians across the Commonwealth have a responsibility to establish and implement parliamentary frameworks which enable active and meaningful engagement with Indigenous Peoples.

### **Workshop B: The Use of Artificial Intelligence in Parliamentary Processes and Practices – Opportunities and Challenges**

This workshop focused on how parliaments are implementing Artificial Intelligence (AI) into their processes and practices. While many jurisdictions have begun to introduce AI into various aspects of their processes, such as transcribing parliamentary debates and simplifying administrative tasks to improve efficiency, this is in the early stages.

Senator Rosemary Moodie was a panelist during this workshop. In her presentation, she provided an overview of the opportunities and challenges for parliamentarians when it comes incorporating AI into their work, noting some of the potential risks and benefits. She also shared the Canadian experience from two perspectives – the Parliament of Canada's approach to AI and the Government's role in the regulation of AI in Canada. Moreover, she spoke about the need to establish best practices for the use of AI in parliaments.

The panelists agreed that AI can undoubtedly bring great opportunities and potential benefits to parliaments but cautioned that safeguards must be developed against dangerous and/or unintended consequences, such as the inclusion of bias and 'fake news' in AI-produced analysis, leaks of private and sensitive information, and the risk of hacking of AI systems by 'bad actors'.

Panelists also agreed that parliaments and jurisdictions need to develop the capabilities to take advantage of the benefits that AI can offer while mitigating the potential risks, noting that it is a complex issue and that different responses will be needed based on the individual context of each jurisdiction. Panelists suggested the scrutiny of parliamentary committees as an important tool in examining the issue based on their experiences with inquiries in the Canadian Senate and the United Kingdom's House of Lords. The workshop also featured a presentation on the AI initiative of the Brazilian Chamber of Deputies, which includes AI-powered analysis of citizens' opinions on bills, as well as AI summarization of bills and parliamentary speeches.

At the end of the session, workshop participants endorsed the recommendation that parliaments should encourage the sharing of best practice and lessons learned from integrating Artificial Intelligence into parliamentary processes and practices, and consider the creation of a CPA steering committee on the use of Artificial Intelligence in parliaments.

### **Workshop C: Violence and Abuse of Parliamentarians: Case Studies from the Commonwealth**

Parliamentarians carry out a crucial role in democracy. Threats to their safety impact not only their physical and mental wellbeing but also their ability to speak openly and freely

in the democratic systems they work in. This workshop considered issues of violence towards and the abuse of parliamentarians, the changing trends in such behaviour, their impacts on individual welfare and the wider society, and which cohorts are more vulnerable.

The discussion highlighted both the presence of combative political climates and the rise of online platforms and social media as factors contributing to modern abusive behaviour towards parliamentarians. Social media, 'fake news', Artificial Intelligence and cyberbullying are some examples of threats in the online space. These can have an impact on the mental health of those targeted; however, they can also cross over into threats to physical safety. Moreover, they may foster a wider climate of distrust and fear of speaking out in public and in democratic institutions.

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At the end of the session, workshop participants endorsed the recommendation that parliaments of the Commonwealth should be committed to providing robust security measures for Members and their staff, adaptable to changing political landscapes, and supplemented by adequate and accessible medical, physical, mental health and legal support.

#### **Workshop D: How can Legislatures Best Support and Promote LGBT+ Participation?**

The workshop focused on how legislatures can promote and encourage a positive environment for the political engagement of LGBT+ voices in the democratic process.

Panelists discussed the importance of a diverse range of voices and experiences in both the membership of legislatures and in the views presented to them through political engagement. The panel discussion highlighted the need to acknowledge different LGBT+ perspectives and encourage diverse representation. Panelists agreed that without LGBT+ participation, legislation and policies may overlook critical social perspectives and experiences.

The workshop highlighted the challenges some jurisdictions face in supporting and promoting LGBT+ participation. Workshop participants spoke about some societal and cultural norms being 'less welcoming' of LGBT+ participation, making it politically challenging for some legislatures to support the LGBT+ community.

Panelists agreed that inclusive and equal political systems are fundamental to sustainable legislative development, noting the value of meaningful engagement, open dialogue and participation between parliamentary and LGBT+ communities. While there was recognition that some jurisdictions had made significant progress in this space, there was a consensus that most jurisdictions could do more to support and promote LGBT+ participation. Other key themes that were raised by workshop participants included the

economic cost of inclusion and exclusion, the role of the CPA in supporting and promoting LGBT+ participation, and the impact of cultural and religious resistance to LGBT+ participation in some jurisdictions.

At the end of the session, workshop participants endorsed the recommendation that political actors across the Commonwealth have a responsibility to listen to the voices of LGBT+ citizens and support their meaningful participation in the democratic process.

### **Workshop E: Human Trafficking, Refugees and Immigration across the Commonwealth: Open Doors or Building Walls?**

This workshop focused on the complex opportunities and challenges presented by immigration, displacement and the movement of people throughout the world, including the particular issues associated with human trafficking as well as the unprecedented number of refugees.

Panelists, including Ontario's Donna Skelly, MPP, highlighted how different countries have responded to these challenges in unique ways, and the critical role to be played by parliamentarians in implementing change at the local level.

Panelists described the specific nature of some of the challenges presented by human trafficking, the impact of climate change on low lying countries and the migration pressures that result, the various approaches to refugees adopted by different countries, and free movement protocols in Africa. A range of strategies that have been implemented by countries in response to these issues were outlined, including 'migration with dignity' policies, and the wiping of forced or fraudulent debt accumulated through trafficking.

The implications of the distinction between migration and refugee processes, including the challenges and benefits associated with people movement within each of these systems were also discussed, as well as where changes may be needed to adequately respond to contemporary challenges.

At the end of the session, workshop participants endorsed the amended recommendation that all movements of people within the Commonwealth should be free from exploitation, within the framework of the Global Compact on Refugees, and Global Compact on Migration, and align with the commitment to universal human rights in the Commonwealth Charter.

### **Workshop F: Benchmarking, Standards and Guidelines: Strengthening the Institution of Parliaments through the Adoption of Best Practice**

This workshop focused on discussions around how the Commonwealth could explore benchmarking tools, standards and guidelines to improve good governance and strengthen parliamentary institutions.

Panelists discussed the importance of benchmarking in building institutions that function effectively and are resilient to the complexities of modern governance. In discussing why benchmarks are relevant, it was noted that they demonstrate commitment to democratic values and foster transparency around parliamentary processes, which in turn builds public trust.

The CPA has 132 benchmarks which have been developed since 2006. Thirty legislatures have undertaken assessments since the benchmarks were updated in 2018. Panelists

provided examples of supported self-assessment processes that have taken place in different parliaments around the world. While a report with recommendations is developed by the CPA Secretariat, it is up to each individual parliament to implement the recommendations. The recommendations can serve as an opportunity for self-reflection and a roadmap for change, regardless of whether they are implemented.

Panelists reinforced the relevance of establishing appropriate codes of conduct, which are complementary to and act as ethical standards supporting the benchmarks. Codes of conduct establish clear expectations and sanctions, and therefore set a high bar for accountability.

It was highlighted that any benchmarks and codes of conduct should be flexible so that they can be adapted to different legislatures.

Following the presentations, the panelists answered questions on the practical challenges of adopting benchmarks, including those related to digitalisation and the emergence of social media, and preserving democracy in the face of change.

At the end of the session, workshop participants endorsed the recommendation that Commonwealth parliaments should commit to exploring relevant benchmarking tools, standards and guidelines, including but not limited to the CPA Democratic Benchmarks, that can be adapted and implemented within their respective parliaments to strengthen their institutions and promote good governance.

### **Workshop G: Combatting Discriminatory Legislation: 365 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence (Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians Topic)**

This workshop examined the role that parliamentarians and governments have in combatting discriminatory legislation, particularly that which negatively impacts women and girls, and the challenges that come with addressing persistent gender inequalities and enacting gender-responsive laws. Discussions focused on the unique ways that different countries have responded to those challenges, and addressed how the CPA membership and international organizations like UN Women could contribute to developing best practice.

Panelists highlighted the current trends regarding the rights of women and girls in their jurisdictions. Each presented specific examples of initiatives that have been undertaken to address discriminatory laws on marriage and divorce, inheritance, welfare benefits, gender-based violence and the gender pay gap, such as the passing of bills or resolutions, convening of subject matter committees and unannounced visits to relevant agencies to assess work against human rights principles. All jurisdictions are experiencing similar issues, to a greater or lesser extent, and all panelists acknowledged that, despite the many successes, there is still much work to be done. Impediments to the swifter implementation of law reform include insufficient data collection due to weak reporting mechanisms, inadequate education of the public on the relevant issues and ineffective communication of legislative change, as well as the costs and difficulties typically associated with making change. At the conclusion of the presentations and the Chair's comments, participants from India, Pakistan, South Africa and Canada shared the progress their respective jurisdictions have made with respect to addressing discriminatory legislation.



At the end of the session, workshop participants endorsed the recommendation that legislatures across the Commonwealth should ensure that they have CEDAW-compliant policies and legislation in place to effectively tackle all forms of harassment, discrimination and abuse.

### **Workshop H: Creating Inclusive Elections for Persons with Disabilities**

This workshop addressed the critical need for inclusivity in the electoral process, exploring the challenges faced by different groups in society and proposing actionable strategies to ensure that all persons with disabilities can participate fully in elections. 2024 has been named the 'Year of Elections', with a record number of elections taking place and many Commonwealth jurisdictions have faced these challenges in recent months. Panelists provided examples from each of their jurisdictions as to how their parliaments had tackled these challenges and suggested inclusive processes to provide increased inclusivity. A virtual panelist from the OSCE Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) also provided relevant examples from election monitoring and technical assistance activities in North America, Europe and Central Asia.

Electoral accessibility is for everyone, and no member of society should feel excluded from the democratic process. Through the presentations, discussions and shared experiences, the workshop helped to raise awareness, generate solutions and foster collaboration among stakeholders committed to enhancing accessibility to elections for persons with disabilities. Elections are a cornerstone of democratic practices in the Commonwealth and across the world, yet individuals with disabilities often face significant barriers that hinder their ability to participate in elections equally.

At the end of the session, workshop participants endorsed the recommendation that Commonwealth parliaments should commit to integrating technological solutions and adjustments to allow for inclusive participation in electoral processes and practices for all persons living with disabilities.

### **8th COMMONWEALTH WOMEN PARLIAMENTARIANS (CWP) CONFERENCE**

#### **Theme: Engaging, Promoting and Retaining Women in Power**

Women Parliamentarians from across the Commonwealth gathered for the 8th CWP Conference to discuss women's representation in parliaments, gender sensitisation and quotas amongst a wide range of topics. Participants also discussed equal representation in parliaments through a series of workshops and governance meetings including four learning and development workshops for delegates.

The CWP Conference was opened by the CWP Chairperson, Hon. Dr Zainab Gimba, MP, Member of the House of Representatives at the National Assembly of Nigeria, who welcomed delegates. The New South Wales CWP representative, Ms. Lynda Voltz, MP, spoke to delegates about her experience as a legislator. Over 100 women parliamentarians and delegates attended the conference which saw leading figures in Commonwealth parliaments addressing participants and included four wide-ranging sessions. The topics of the sessions were:

- Promoting the Political Participation of Young Women and Girls
- Gender and National Climate Planning: moving from commitment to scalable action

- Future-Proofing Democracy: Innovations in Security and Support for Women Parliamentarians
- The Retention of Women in Parliaments: How to Keep Women in Politics?

At the CWP Business meeting, delegates received an update on the CWP network's activities during the previous year and the plans for the year ahead.

Ahead of the 8th CWP Conference, the CWP Steering Committee met to discuss activities as well as key themes for future conferences and meetings. The Steering Committee elected Hon. Kate Doust, MLC from the Parliament of Western Australia, as the CWP Vice-Chairperson for another one-year term.

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The delegation would like to thank the Library of Parliament for the excellent background information prepared for the use of the delegation during the conference. The delegation is also deeply appreciative for the briefing material provided by Global Affairs Canada.

### **TRAVEL COSTS**

Travel expenses associated with this activity can be found in the delegation's financial report. This report is available in the [Financial Disclosure](#) section of the Parliamentary Diplomacy website.

Respectfully submitted,

Alexandra Mendès, MP

Chair of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association

