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

**73rd Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments**

**London, United Kingdom**

**March 10 to 14, 2025**

## **Report**

Hon. David Wells, Senator, and Hon. Paulette Senior, Senator, attended the 73rd Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments on behalf of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) in London, United Kingdom (UK), from March 10 to 14, 2025.

Participants at this seminar included over 50 delegates who were either parliamentarians or clerks from 25 Commonwealth jurisdictions.

### **PURPOSE**

The annual Westminster Seminar is CPA UK's flagship capacity-building program. Held at the UK Parliament, 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.

### **SUMMARY**

#### **Day 1: Monday, March 10**

On the first day of the program, delegates came together to mark Commonwealth Day, an annual occasion celebrating the Commonwealth of Nations. This year's theme, *Together We Thrive*, was echoed by the Speaker of the House of Commons during a parliamentary flag-raising ceremony, and by His Majesty King Charles III during the multi-faith service at Westminster Abbey.

#### **Day 2: Tuesday, March 11**

##### **Effective Parliaments and Parliamentary Systems Analysis**

In this session, delegates considered their different parliamentary systems. In small groups, the delegates analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of their parliamentary systems and others across the Commonwealth.

The discussions reinforced that there is no single best parliamentary system, but rather a spectrum of approaches suited to different political environments. The ability of parliaments to function effectively depends on financial independence, robust scrutiny mechanisms, and engagement with both the public and opposition. As political

landscapes evolve, continuous learning and adaptation remain crucial for strengthening democratic governance.

### **The Role and Responsibilities of Parliamentarians**

This session explored how parliamentarians can contribute to making parliament more effective, while managing the expectations of the electorate and delivering on promises made on the campaign trail.

The discussion highlighted universal challenges in parliamentary roles, including constituent engagement, political integrity, media influence, and balancing professional and personal responsibilities. Key solutions include data-driven policymaking, direct engagement with the electorate, strategic media use, and the establishment of clear personal boundaries.

### **Pressure on Parliamentarians**

Discussions highlighted how different parliamentary structures influence the scrutiny of legislation and the amendment process. While cross-party collaboration can occur in committees, political realities often mean that members vote along party lines when bills reach the chamber. The influence of party discipline in legislative scrutiny was noted across several jurisdictions.

The discussion reinforced the complexity of legislative scrutiny and the impact of parliamentary structures on the effectiveness of law-making. Key challenges include balancing political realities with cross-party cooperation, ensuring procedural integrity, and adapting to evolving technological influences.

Strengthening parliamentary resources, enhancing transparency, and maintaining trust in legislative processes were identified as crucial to improving legislative scrutiny and policymaking.

### **Effective Management of Time and Resources**

This session explored the administrative functions within different parliamentary settings, highlighting the challenges faced by parliamentary clerks and support staff. A key theme was the importance of structured processes, resource management, and staff recognition in ensuring efficient parliamentary operations.

The discussion underscored the importance of structured administrative processes in ensuring smooth parliamentary operations. Effective delegation, strategic task management, and workplace recognition were highlighted as key factors in maintaining efficiency and staff morale. Additionally, logistical constraints, such as the absence of permanent parliamentary facilities, require innovative approaches to time and resource management. Strengthening internal communication and establishing clear procedural guidelines were identified as essential steps for improving parliamentary administration.

### **The Role and Responsibilities of Clerks**

The role of parliamentary officials was highlighted as essential to maintaining trust in legislative processes. Clerks and officials serve as impartial custodians of parliamentary procedure, ensuring accuracy, transparency, and efficiency in legislative work. They also

play a key role in facilitating inquiries, managing legislative records, and supporting parliamentary committees.

### **Day 3: Wednesday, March 12**

#### **Holding the Executive to Account**

This discussion explored the function of second chambers in legislative processes, mechanisms for holding governments accountable, and the importance of improving representation within parliamentary systems. The experiences of the UK House of Lords and the Parliament of Zambia were highlighted, offering insights into different models of governance and oversight.

The discussion underscored the importance of strong parliamentary scrutiny mechanisms, whether through second chambers or committee-based processes. While the House of Lords serves a vital role in refining legislation through expert contributions, challenges around legitimacy and reform remain. In Zambia, efforts to strengthen parliamentary oversight and increase women's representation are ongoing, though resource constraints and executive dominance present obstacles. The session highlighted the need for continuous improvements in legislative processes, accountability mechanisms, and representative diversity across parliamentary systems.

#### **Committee Recommendations and Follow Up**

This session focused on the role of parliamentary committees in ensuring government accountability, with particular attention given to the Public Accounts Committee (PAC) and the Health and Social Care Committee. The discussion also touched on methods of tracking and following up on committee recommendations, the relationship between committees and the government, and the challenges faced by committees in holding public bodies to account.

The session highlighted the vital role of parliamentary committees in holding the government to account, ensuring that public funds are spent efficiently, and following up on recommendations. While the PAC focuses on scrutiny of public spending and value for money, the Health and Social Care Committee conducts more detailed, long-term inquiries. Both committees face challenges, such as ensuring recommendations are implemented, dealing with arms-length bodies, and managing relationships with government officials. Despite these challenges, both committees have made strides in holding the government accountable and ensuring that public services meet the highest standards of efficiency and effectiveness.

#### **Effective Report Writing**

This report writing workshop focused on the key principles of drafting effective parliamentary reports, with particular emphasis on writing clear conclusions and recommendations. Delegates engaged in discussions on best practices, common challenges, and strategies for ensuring reports are impactful and well-structured.

The workshop reinforced the importance of structured, evidence-based, and strategically framed recommendations in parliamentary reports. Ensuring reports are clear, well-edited, and mindful of external interpretation enhances their impact and likelihood of

influencing policy. Ongoing improvements in committee processes, including better follow-up mechanisms, remain an area for further development.

#### **Day 4: Thursday, March 13**

##### **Parliamentary Culture**

Senator Wells was a panelist for the session on parliamentary culture. Key topics included parliamentary accountability, the role of social media, and measures to combat disengagement with elections. Participants discussed the changing culture of parliamentary work, the importance of ethics and standards, and the challenges of ensuring public engagement, particularly among younger generations.

The discussions underscored the importance of maintaining high ethical standards, particularly as there is a sense that public trust in politicians is in decline. Both parliamentary committees and social media play pivotal roles in shaping public perceptions of political institutions. Engagement with younger people and addressing issues such as corruption and electoral participation are seen as essential to ensuring the long-term health and legitimacy of democratic systems.

##### **Inclusive Parliaments**

This session, which was moderated by Senator Senior, focused on the importance of diversity and inclusion within parliamentary institutions, the challenges faced by minority groups, and the steps being taken to improve gender equality and accessibility for people with disabilities. It also touched on the broader societal implications of these issues, including the role of political campaigns in promoting or hindering equality.

The session underscored the ongoing need for diversity and inclusion in parliamentary institutions. Delegates agreed that the challenges faced by women, minority groups, and people with disabilities must continue to be addressed, with a particular focus on improving representation, changing parliamentary cultures, and enhancing accessibility. Efforts to ensure that all members of society can participate fully in the democratic process are crucial for building more inclusive and equitable political systems.

##### **Parliamentary Outreach**

This session discussed various approaches to enhancing parliamentary engagement, particularly with young people, underrepresented groups, and those in local communities. It highlighted strategies for promoting democratic participation, the challenges of digital engagement, and the importance of fostering inclusive environments within political institutions.

In conclusion, there was a shared sense that the future of democratic engagement lies in a balance between digital outreach and traditional, in-person engagement. While social media offers a direct channel for young people to voice their opinions, it also poses challenges in terms of maintaining respectful dialogue and fostering a deeper understanding of political processes. Additionally, there is an increasing need to defend democratic values in the face of rising social media toxicity and to encourage meaningful political participation that extends beyond superficial online interactions.

Efforts to improve youth engagement, ensure accessibility for underrepresented groups, and promote transparency in political reforms are essential for strengthening democracy and fostering a politically active and informed population.

### **Implementing AI in Parliaments**

The discussions focused on the potential applications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in parliamentary functions, with a particular emphasis on improving efficiency, ensuring confidentiality, and the ethical considerations surrounding AI tools. Notably, the use of AI for tasks such as transcribing debates, summarising written questions, and triaging constituent queries was highlighted, with various countries exploring the integration of AI into their parliamentary processes.

AI presents significant opportunities for improving parliamentary efficiency, communication, and constituent engagement. However, its integration into parliamentary systems must be handled carefully to ensure data security, manage public perception, and ensure that technology does not replace the nuanced judgement of human parliamentarians. Collaborative efforts between parliaments and AI developers, alongside robust education and transparency initiatives, are essential for the successful implementation of AI in parliamentary processes.

### **Guidelines for AI in Parliaments**

The discussions focused on the applications of Artificial Intelligence (AI) in parliamentary functions, highlighting its potential to improve efficiency, enhance cybersecurity, and facilitate knowledge-sharing between legislatures. Key topics included AI-driven transcription tools, the ethical and legal considerations of AI-generated content, and the need for structured training to maximize AI's effectiveness in parliamentary settings.

AI presents significant opportunities for improving parliamentary efficiency, communication, and security. However, its integration into parliamentary processes must be carefully managed to mitigate risks related to data security, accuracy, and overreliance on automation. Ongoing collaboration between parliaments, AI developers, and legal experts, alongside comprehensive training and policy development, will be essential to ensure that AI enhances parliamentary functions without undermining human expertise and institutional integrity.

### **Experience of AI as a Parliamentarian**

The discussions highlighted varying levels of Artificial Intelligence (AI) adoption across different parliamentary systems, with a focus on improving administrative tasks, enhancing productivity, and addressing concerns around privacy and security. Several jurisdictions are experimenting with AI tools for transcription, research, legislative drafting, and speechwriting. However, there are concerns about data security, especially regarding the use of AI tools developed by large corporations.

AI is seen as a valuable tool for enhancing productivity and efficiency in parliamentary functions, particularly for administrative tasks and transcription. However, privacy, security, and the control over data remain key concerns that must be addressed for AI adoption to be fully embraced. Collaboration between parliaments and sharing knowledge on best practices will be crucial in navigating the challenges and opportunities presented by AI.

## **Day 5: Friday, March 14**

On the final day, participants visited UK constituencies, where they observed constituency surgeries and visited local businesses and schools. These visits offered valuable insights into the day-to-day responsibilities of parliamentarians beyond Westminster and highlighted the importance of maintaining a strong connection with the constituents they represent.

Concurrently, parliamentary clerks and officials visited the UK Parliament's Education Centre to observe its outreach activities. A central theme throughout the week was constituent engagement, with a particular focus on youth involvement. The Education Centre exemplifies the UK Parliament's efforts to promote political literacy and transparency among citizens. Following this visit, clerks and officials participated in a walking tour of Westminster, gaining a deeper understanding not only of parliamentary history but also of the wider historical context of the area.

## **CONCLUSION**

The 73rd 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 program, with 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.

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.

## **Travel Expenses**

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, M.P.

Chair of the Canadian Branch of the  
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association