



**REPORT OF
UK BRANCH SEMINAR**

May 7 – 19, 2006

United Kingdom and Belgium

Report

May 7-19, 2006, I represented the Government of Canada at the CPA-UK Branch Seminar in the UK and Belgium. Due to voting necessities in the House of Commons, there was no MP at this seminar. The only other Canadian was an MPP from Ontario, Mr. Bruce Crozier, Deputy Speaker of the Government of Ontario.

23 countries were represented, including: Australia, Bangladesh, Barbados, Canada, Guernsey, India, Jersey, Kenya, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Mauritius, Namibia, New Zealand, Pakistan, St.Helena, Sierra Leone, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania-Zanzibar, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos and Zambia. The delegation consisted mainly of Members of Parliament, either at the federal, state or provincial level. Several of the delegates were Speakers or Deputy Speakers. I was the only representative of an Upper House. Interestingly, there were only 2 women – myself and a Member of Parliament of New Zealand.

This seminar was described as the most ambitious CPA seminar ever held. The theme was “*Governance and Culture of the United Kingdom*”.

The seminar was divided into four locations: Westminster, London; Birmingham, England; Cardiff, Wales and Brussels, Belgium. This meant extensive travel by train and bus including a very special trip on the Eurostar across the English Channel.

The aim of the seminar was to give Commonwealth Parliamentarians an understanding of United Kingdom (UK) governance & culture.

The objectives were:

- To learn about the parliamentary and political scene at Westminster
- To gain an insight into devolution and local government in the UK
- To visit parliamentary constituencies
- To learn about supranational governance and its implications for the UK
- To discuss the contribution of the CPA within the Commonwealth
- To engage with colleagues in the CPA UK Branch

The delegates spent a considerable amount of time in the Palace of Westminster learning its history, its tradition and its roles. We were welcomed by the Right Honourable Michael Martin, MP, Speaker of the House of Commons in the Speaker's House. The Speaker is a delightful Scottish gentleman with a vast knowledge of Parliament and an abundance of wonderful stories.

Several sessions dealt with issues surrounding UK Governance, especially Governance at a Supranational level through the European Union. Specifically, we learned about:

- Development Policy,

- EU's Trade Policy and Relations with the WTO
- External Relations Policy of the EU
- EU Foreign Affairs Committee
- EU Development Committee
- EU International Trade Committee.

During a working lunch in Brussels, we heard a presentation on the UK Presidency which had just ended and the current Austrian Presidency.

A visit to the city of Birmingham was chosen to familiarize the delegates with the recent development in the UK of the process known as "*the Development of the City-Region Model*". Projects such as the one in Birmingham are designed to give increased authority to core cities through a process of devolution and localization. Fundamental to all of this is the regeneration of old industrial cities in the UK to modern cities with emergent economies. Huge restoration projects are central to this process, bringing together the business, cultural, tourism and housing components.

In Birmingham, we met with elected representatives as well as officials of the City, all of whom were immensely hospitable and informative. A highlight was a reception at the Lord Mayor's Suite at the Council House.

Each delegate was assigned to a Member of Parliament or a Member of the House of Lords from the Birmingham region for a special visit to familiarize us with some of the creative ideas being developed. In my case, I spent an afternoon with Lord Corbett of Castle Vale. When I learned about my visit, I thought I would be going to the castle of a Lord! Instead, Lord Corbett of Castle Vale took me to a community development project serving approximately eight thousand citizens. This neighbourhood has been totally revamped from one of decaying houses, social problems and hopelessness to one of pride and a vision for the future. There is a remarkable level of community participation in all decision making. The community includes a school, a library, a community center, a recreation centre, day care and many other services. Its name is "Castle Vale".

A highlight of the visit to Birmingham was a concert by the Birmingham City Orchestra in the new Birmingham Symphony Hall. We were invited to a reception in the presence of TRH The Earl and Countess of Wessex, both of whom were delighted to meet members of a Commonwealth Delegation.

In Cardiff, Wales, we visited the beautiful National Assembly of Wales opened on March 1, 2006. This outstanding new building features Canadian red wood in a magnificent architectural complex. We were all impressed by how modern this Parliament is with every MP having a desktop computer at his seat in Parliament. Wales has also made history with more women than men in the Cabinet.

We attended a question period in the National Assembly, followed by discussions on the devolution of power process resulting from the "*Government of Wales Bill*". Before leaving we had a most interesting visit to the National Gallery and Museum of Wales.

The seminar concluded with two days devoted to the role of the “House of Commons” and the role of the “House of Lords” and the role of the “Judiciary”. We attended question period with Prime Minister Blair. This was interesting since his leadership was being challenged at the time. Many questions related to immigration, national security, health care and the environment.

For myself, the most interesting and the most surprising experience was the realization of the extent to which the House of Lords has evolved and is evolving. Not only have most of the hereditary Lords been removed, but a very modern and democratic selection process is in place, headed by a non-partisan Commission. Each party in the House of Commons submits nominations for vacancies in the House of Lords as they arise. From these lists, the best candidates are interviewed and a final nomination is forwarded to the Prime Minister who accepts the decision of the Commission. As a result, the House of Lords is becoming ever more representative of many segments of society in the UK, and the Lords are undertaking a far greater number of national and local projects such as Castle Vale which I have described. It was noted, however, that the wisdom of a truly elected House of Lords is very much in the public thought. One member of the House of Lords said “we must nurture democracy and engage youth”.

The final seminar was on “Civil Society”. Delegates were continually impressed by the fact that Westminster is indeed “*the Mother of Parliament*”, and yet is ever changing especially with respect to the European Union and the demands within the United Kingdom for greater powers in Scotland and Wales as well as at the municipal level. Of course, the unresolved political situation in Northern Ireland remains a great concern to Westminster.

Opinions vary greatly in the United Kingdom regarding the merits of the European Union. This was apparent in London and in Brussels. There seems to be a very genuine fear amongst many in the United Kingdom that power is gradually being lost to the EU. There is even a “European Scrutiny Committee”. The best example of this is the determination of the British to retain the “pound” rather than accepting the Euro. There are many other issues at stake such as trade, agricultural policy, human rights, immigration and multiculturalism. It should be remembered always that the EU was created after WWII to ensure peace and stability, through sustainable development and shared values.

It should be mentioned that throughout this seminar, the future of the Commonwealth was discussed from a number of perspectives. Amongst those attending, there seemed to be a consensus that the Commonwealth is a valuable body and can continue to provide important links far into the future.

Since this seminar was about Governance and Culture of the United Kingdom, it was interesting that the very first lecture referred to UK Governance as “a quiet revolution”. Westminster is central to all of this. A defining feature of the culture of the United Kingdom is that the UK Constitution is unwritten, but consists of a consensus based on statutes, the common law, commentaries, conventions and of course the role of the Monarch. There are strengths and weaknesses in an unwritten Constitution. It has nevertheless produced a durable democracy, dating to its beginnings in 1832, yet one in which government can suspend the rules without the weight of a Constitution hanging

over its head. Huge changes in the governance of the UK have occurred since 1973 when the UK joined the European Economic Community.

Parliamentarians in the UK seem to be consumed with the devolution of powers, and those in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are equally consumed with demands for their own identities and decision making.

At Westminster, as elsewhere, the Iraq war and terrorism are consuming topics, producing a very important focus on immigration, multiculturalism, national security and international military commitments, all in an effort to manage globalization.

After a seminar such as this, one is left with the impression that the great democratic institutions of the United Kingdom are very much intact despite the evolving processes that are underway, and that the rich and long culture and tradition of Westminster and the Commonwealth are enduring.

If the camaraderie and wonderful discussion amongst the delegates to the CPA seminar are any indication, the democracy that began in Britain still has deep meaning in this 21st century. However, since so many delegates were from Africa and Asian countries, one was acutely aware of the enormous social and economic gaps inside the Commonwealth. Poverty, education, health and the challenges of emerging democracies came to the fore frequently in our talks. The representatives of some countries spoke proudly of "creating democracy".

One delegate asked if the Commonwealth itself could have a representative at the EU? It should be noted that this was the first time a Commonwealth group had gone to Brussels to attend a session of the EU, and meet directly with representatives of Member States as well as officials of the EU.

All representatives at the CPA-UK seminar left with the hope of keeping in contact with each other and of making the program of the seminar enduring. There was general agreement that the CPA can play a big role in urging the Commonwealth to take a stronger lead on international issues and on the importance of good governance through the role of parliamentary democracy. The Right Honourable Don McKinnon, Secretary General of the Commonwealth, spoke about core values such as respect, equality, tolerance and human rights. The Commonwealth is a guardian of quiet diplomacy, serving as a link between development and democracy. Good governance is the opposite of corruption, enlightening and empowering people in their own situation.

The Right Honourable Don McKinnon said in reference to democracy: "It is easier to slide down the pole than to get to the top."

For me, it was a great privilege to represent the Canadian Parliament at this seminar. I hope to have opportunities to share these experiences with my fellow Canadians. We all have much to learn from each other.

Respectfully submitted,

Hon. Marilyn Trenholme Counsell, Senator
Canadian (Federal) Branch

of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

Travel Costs

NAME OF ASSOCIATION	Canadian (Federal) Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)
ACTIVITY	UK Branch Seminar
DESTINATION	London, UK and Brussels, Belgium
DATES	May 7 – 19, 2006
NAMES OF SENATORS	The Honourable Marilyn Trenholme Counsell, Senator
TRANSPORTATION	\$5,381.29
ACCOMMODATION	\$0
HOSPITALITY	\$0
PER DIEMS	\$ 530.32
OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$0
MISCELLANEOUS/REGISTRATION FEES	\$0
TOTAL	\$5,911.61