



**Report of the Canadian Parliamentary Delegation
on the Bilateral Parliamentary Visit**

**Canadian Branch of the
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)**

Nuku'lofa, Tonga

January 15 - 22, 2008

Report

The delegation of the Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association visited Tonga from January 15 – 22, 2008. Mr. Russ Hiebert, MP, Chair of the Canadian Branch led the delegation. Participants included the Honourable Senators Pierrette Ringuette and Terry Stratton and Members of Parliament Nicole Demers and Joe Preston. The delegation was assisted by Carol Chafe, Executive Secretary of the Branch.

The CPA constitution encourages visits between member countries with the objective of giving parliamentarians the opportunity to trade views and to discuss matters of common interest both in bilateral relations and on the international Commonwealth scene. The Executive Committee of the Canadian Branch had noted that the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) is facing major changes in both its direction and governance issues for the future and it was felt that establishing contacts with those Branches of a similar view would be advantageous to the Association prior to the 54th Annual Conference to be held in Malaysia, August 2008. The visit also provided the delegates with an opportunity to visit a country which is in the process of modernising its constitution, electoral system and democratic parliamentary institutions, moving forward from an absolute monarchy to a fully representative elected legislative system.

While in Nuku'lofa, the delegates were provided the opportunity to visit several Canada Fund projects. These projects ranged from the construction of water storage tanks in various villages throughout Tonga to an expansion of the Catholic Women's League Handicraft Centre.

The water tank construction projects are vital on an island like Tonga which does not have a secure source of potable water – most is provided by containment systems dependent on rainwater runoff from buildings. The tanks, constructed from concrete provide a safe and secure water storage system for villages.

In 2007 – 2008, the Canada Fund contributed approximately \$90,000 to Tonga for projects in the areas of income generation, meeting basic human needs, education, and governance and strengthening civil society. The Canada Fund has a very good reputation for the way it administers and delivers the fund – through direct collaboration with village leaders who identify their priorities. These projects also encourage skills development and require the communities to provide a financial contribution to the project. The Tongans met by the delegates constantly demonstrated their respect for the Fund organizers and the successes of the various projects and were not hesitant in pushing forward their hopes for continued funding of these small but vital projects which meet the real needs of the villages.

These visits provided the delegates with the opportunity to meet with ordinary Tongans and to learn more about their culture and society. At one of the visits of local Canada Fund projects, the delegates were introduced to the process of making tapa cloth and small objects. This is a very labour intensive process of converting the bark of the paper mulberry tree into a large pliable textile glued together using the root of the

tapioca plant, dried and then decorated using vegetable dyes. The Canada Fund provided the initial start-up funds for the project and the end results provide a cash dividend to the participating women. Production of a large tapa is completed through a "tapa-making bee" similar to the quilting bees of the past in Canada. Following the demonstration, delegates were given samples of the local tapa handicrafts to commemorate their visit. Finding employment for many of the local village women is extremely difficult in a country like Tonga and this kind of project provides them with the opportunity to earn money to assist in sending their children to school. Re-discovering this craft is fitting, as tapa cloth was used as a form of currency in Tongan history and cultural heritage.

The visits to these Canada Fund projects set the tone for meetings with a series of representatives from the Royal Family, the Barons and the People's Representatives over a period of two days. The delegation was able to develop an understanding of the current system of government as practiced in the Kingdom of Tonga and the desires of the People's representatives for major changes in the system.

During the meeting with Her Royal Highness Princess Piloevu Mafile'o Tuita, who was acting as the Princess Regent in the absence of her brother, the King, the delegates were provided with an opportunity to learn more about the history of this longstanding monarchy within the Kingdom of Tonga. She noted the pride and love for the royal family in Tonga and the decision of her brother, who will be crowned King in June, to transfer more powers to the Kingdom's Legislative Assembly.

The Princess Regent expressed her pride in the fact that Tonga has one of the highest literacy rates in the Pacific Region as a direct result of the introduction of Christianity and the peoples' desire to be able to read the Bible for themselves. The high level of literacy in Tonga has encouraged the country's rulers to have a strong belief in the future for young Tongans. Higher education is slowly becoming more accessible for youth and Tonga has already trained so many nurses that they are moving off island to find work in New Zealand, Australia and the United States. Once they have found employment, they commence sending remittances (funds) home to finance their families. It was noted that approximately 70 per cent of the country's GDP results from these overseas remittances. This information was to be repeated several times in various meetings with officials from the Tongan government throughout the visit.

The delegation had the opportunity to meet with the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Governor of the Northern Islands, the Hon. S.T. Taumoepeau-Tupou, to discuss issues of concern within the South Pacific Region. Although the country has some armed forces, it depends in large part on the services available from New Zealand. This had become evident in November of 2006 with the riots in the capital city of Nuku'lofa. New Zealand had sent specially trained police officers to bring stability to the city and surrounding region.

It became apparent from the discussions, that Tonga and other countries in the South Pacific are developing closer relations with the Peoples' Republic of China. The relations are economic in nature and, as a consequence, are having an influence on the geo-political status of the region. This is apparent in the increasing isolation of Taiwan within the South Pacific region. China has provided funding for construction of schools,

hospitals and roads as well as cultural centers. As a result, there are an increasing number of Chinese nationals living and opening small economic centers in both Tonga and other South Pacific nations. Ties with Australia and New Zealand continue to be strong in nature, with the majority of Tongans who immigrate to these countries doing so for economic and health reasons.

Discussions revealed that Tonga, like Canada, is a strong defender of the UN Law of the Sea and, in tandem with Iceland and other Nordic countries, seeks to work to limit the impact of the whaling industry on one of Tonga's primary tourist attractions – the passage of large whales migrating from south to north and vice versa. Both countries are also strong proponents of fisheries management off their coasts.

The delegates had the opportunity to meet with representatives of the NGO community in Tonga and were informed about the need for more education of the youth of the country in the areas of the rights and responsibilities of voting. This can be a difficult goal to achieve as the islands which make up the country are separated by long distances and lack an economical transportation system between them. NGO efforts have resulted in the creation of the National Youth Congress which met recently and debated issues of interest in a youth parliament. The youth parliament is an integral part of the outreach programs of the civil society in Tonga which aims to increase the basic knowledge required to meet the end goals of the reform process for the future.

During the discussions, the Tongan presenters raised the problems they are encountering in ensuring that teachers in the outer islands have strong training and materials to support their teaching of human rights and approached the delegates about the possibility of assistance. The delegates agreed to approach the Canadian Teachers' Federation to determine whether there are materials and some funding available to assist in training the Tongan teachers in strengthening this aspect of their responsibilities.

In the absence of the Prime Minister, the delegates met with the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Health, the Hon. Dr. V. Tangi in his office at the main hospital in Nuku'lofa. The majority of the discussions centered on the state of health care in Tonga and the extreme rates of diabetes and related health problems. It was noted that those Tongans suffering from secondary side effects of diabetes, i.e. kidney dialysis, must permanently leave the islands for either New Zealand or Australia as no dialysis equipment is available in Tonga. This results in an increasing level of long-term family separation.

Dr. Tangi emphasized that Tonga has an excellent training program for nurses, dentists, x-ray technicians and pharmacists. Doctors receive the majority of their medical training at one of two medical schools in Fiji or Papua-New Guinea. All countries in the South Pacific Region provide funding to these two schools to providing training for their own people. At present, all costs for medical treatment is provided by the government of Tonga, but as the population ages, it is considering moving to a contributory system to cover the increasing costs of providing medical care. He noted that the government of New Zealand makes financial contributions to assist in covering the costs associated with treatment which has to be provided off-island. During the meeting, he also noted that Tonga has implemented a program of mobile dentistry for children throughout the

country and that infant mortality rates are declining as a result of better distribution of health care.

Dr. Tangi noted that, as Tongans move from the outer islands into major urban centres, there has been a corresponding growth in those diseases resulting from changing lifestyles. He pointed to the increasing rates of diabetes caused by a lower level of physical exercise and changing diet to fat and sugar laden fast foods. The increasing levels of diabetes are putting a strain on the health system which can only worsen in the coming years.

There are efforts in place to improve access to health and medical care in the outer islands and, as electrical power delivery becomes more robust; he hopes that these problems can be mitigated through the use of new technology such as e-health. This program is being developed in conjunction with other countries in the region.

Those patients who require medications may obtain them at hospital pharmacies free of charge or have their prescriptions filled at private pharmacies for a fee. This option exists because the hospitals have a limited number of various drugs available whereas private facilities have a larger inventory of pharmaceuticals.

The delegates expressed some concern that Tonga appears to be exporting its trained nurses as part of the economic planning for the country – these nurses work overseas in New Zealand, Australia and North America and send home remittances which make up an inordinate proportion of the country's GDP. Dr. Tangi responded to these concerns by stating that the country was producing more than a sufficient number of nurses that they were not concerned and that the remittances returned to Tonga were a vital part of the country's economy.

This particular topic was also raised during the delegates' meeting with the Minister of Labour and Commerce, the Hon. Lisiata 'Akolo. The Minister provided the delegation with a similar response to that of Dr. Tangi, and emphasized the need for these remittances as vital for the economy. The discussions then focussed on the potential for future development of industry on the islands in Tonga. Minister 'Akolo noted that despite the fertile nature of the soil and climate within Tonga, the costs of production are extremely high in terms of transportation of the food products both raw and processed. This problem is directly related to the increasing costs for diesel and electricity which is produced by fuel generators. As a result, many Tongans are required to go off island to work as migrant agricultural workers in both New Zealand and Australia. Efforts are underway to set up apprenticeship programs for young Tongans to ensure that a trained workforce will be available in the future to build a more diversified economy.

Reliable power generation appears to be a major problem in the future development of industry in Tonga and there was some discussion of making use of the technology of wind generated power. The delegates noted that they would contact some of the Canadian companies developing wind powered generation equipment to have them contact the Tongan government on possible programs which could be implemented on both the main island and the outer islands.

The close proximity of South East Asian ports and industry are limiting the ability of the South Pacific Islands to gain a foothold in international markets – Tonga realizes its

limitations in terms of being able to accommodate international container shipping and is also examining the feasibility of increasing the size and number of its commercial wharves to permit an increased level of exports of local products.

The opportunity to meet with the members of Cabinet helped to prepare the delegates for their meetings on the more politically sensitive topics of democratic reforms in the Tongan political system. Separate meetings with the representatives of the Barons (life peers) and the Peoples' Representatives on the last day of the visit provided delegates with an understanding of the two differing viewpoints on the crisis in democratic reforms.

The form and speed of implementing the proposed democratic reforms had led to a crisis and riot in Nuku'lofa in November 2006 and despite the apparent willingness of the new King to move ahead on reforms, many in the country do not feel that it is happening fast enough.

During the meeting with the Barons, in effect the hereditary ruling class of Tonga, the delegates were provided with their perspective on the proposed reforms. Of greatest concern, is the question of the timing of implementation of the proposed reforms. The majority of the Barons felt that 2010 would provide sufficient time to educate the Tongans about the reforms and the changes which would come into effect. They reported that, during the meetings with the Peoples' representatives, discussions had been bogged down by their insistence on discussing the details of the reforms rather than the concepts governing the three arms of parliamentary democracy: the Executive; the Judicial and the Legislative. The delay to 2010 would, in their opinion, provide time to train the legislative drafters to draft implementation legislation as well as to educate the people about their responsibilities as electors. Currently, there are insufficient legislative drafters available and it will be necessary to seek outside assistance from more established parliamentary democratic institutions. They viewed the next elections predicted for this May as a learning process.

Members of the delegation raised the question of the need for economic development in Tonga via international investment and the perception that without democratic reforms in a tight money world, investors might be reluctant to fund projects in the country. The Barons responded that they understood the necessity for reforms, but at a pace which would ensure success and not result in further instability in the country. Their major concerns centered on the need to ensure that the four pillars of reform be respected: political reforms; economic reforms; land reform and social reform; in order to guarantee a smooth transition from the feudal monarchical form of government to a fully democratic status. In their view, it will take time to educate the people and rushing to implement all of the reforms without appropriate enacting legislation risks causing instability within the country.

The Barons also expressed concern that international aid funds are directed towards community projects, but that they are not consulted on the direction of the funds and the kinds of projects being funded. Until the reforms are in place, they have the responsibility of safeguarding the lands for the future and this cannot be accomplished if they are not consulted on projects occurring on what they consider to be "their" lands.

The meeting with the Barons was followed by a meeting with three of the Peoples' Representatives. The subjects were essentially the same as those discussed with the

Barons, but the delegates benefited from hearing the views of the elected representatives who were pushing for democratic reforms as quickly as possible. One of the points raised was their desire to have the new rules in place for the next election anticipated for May of this year. The opinions expressed by the representatives indicate that they feel the risk of additional riots and political instability increases with each passing month in the absence of the immediate implementation of the proposed reforms.

Some of the delegates questioned the viability of trying to implement all of the reforms in the absence of an agreed system of voting and re-distribution of seats in the Parliament. The Tongan representatives reiterated their concern for the potential repeat of the unrest in the fall of 2006 if the reforms are delayed until 2010. Another area of concern deals with the role of the King, who currently holds absolute majority in the islands and appoints Ministers for life – this is viewed as seriously limiting the power of the elected officials in any future government. The proposed reforms do not deal with this situation and will need to be revised before the implementation of any of the reforms.

Representative Pohiva reported that the King had the initial report of the Special Committee examining possible reforms for a month before allowing the Report to be presented in the Legislative Assembly. The Cabinet then presented a totally different model for reform without consultation with the elected members. The presentation of this new model was received negatively by the elected members who believe it demonstrated the contempt of the King and Cabinet for the work of the working committee. These actions in turn resulted in the riots which destroyed much of central Nuku'lofa in 2006.

Two of the elected representatives present at the meeting had also been charged with criminal offences in relation to the riots; however, their cases have yet to be heard in court and both expressed the opinion that the charges against them would either be dropped entirely or reduced to minor misdemeanours.

Both meetings provided much information on the current political status of Tonga and a better understanding of the difficulties it faces in moving forward towards a more representative parliamentary democracy.

In meetings with the Hon. 'Alisi Taumoepeau, Attorney General and Minister of Justice, the delegates were provided with additional information on the fallout from the November 2006 riot in Nuku'lofa. She noted that some of the charges had been dropped entirely and others substantially reduced in number; however, she noted that it would not be in the interests of the Tonga people and their belief in the rule of law to not proceed with the charges. Evidence was clear that much of the riot was directly influenced by some of the Peoples' Representatives and as such, the legal process had to be permitted to proceed.

There followed a discussion of the judicial system within Tonga and the training of lawyers and judges, most of whom had received their education and experience in New Zealand and Australia. Over the years, she noted that the Tongan legal system has maintained a good reputation among other countries in the South Pacific through the successful use of alternative forms of justice, including mediation in conflict resolution

which better reflects Tongan culture. Since she had taken on the role of Attorney General and Minister of Justice, changes had been made in the judicial system and with the advent of the reforms, additional changes would be undertaken. The parliamentary and legislative cycle would move from a three year to five year cycle and her office would have the responsibility for drafting any constitutional and electoral changes required to implement the proposed reforms. This will require additional staff training in legislative drafting and the delegates were approached about the possibility of scholarships for Tongan law students to study this area of specialization abroad. No commitments were made by the delegates; however, they did agree to look into the possibilities with law schools at various Canadian universities.

The delegation wishes to extend its gratitude to the parliamentarians, staff and people of Tonga for their warm welcome and generosity throughout its visit. Everyone worked hard to ensure that the delegates had the opportunity to learn as much as possible about this island nation, its proud history and hopes for the future. We would also like to thank Ms. Pamela Deacon, Deputy High Commissioner, Canadian High Commission to New Zealand and the staff in Wellington for their unstinting assistance provided to the delegation prior to and during its time in Tonga.

Respectfully submitted,

Mr. Russ Hiebert, M.P., Chair
Canadian Branch
of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)
ACTIVITY	Bilateral Parliamentary Visit
DESTINATION	Nuku'loga, Tonga
DATES	January 15-22, 2008
DELEGATION	
SENATE	Hon. Pierrette Ringuette Hon. Terry Stratton
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Nicole Demers, M.P. Russ Hiebert, M.P. Joe Preston, M.P.
STAFF	Carol Chafe, Executive Secretary
TRANSPORTATION	\$ 45,909.86
ACCOMMODATION	\$ 4,182.85
HOSPITALITY	\$ 2,482.99
PER DIEMS	\$ 1,025.61
OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$ 994.92
MISCELLANEOUS/REGISTRATION FEES	\$ 197.03
TOTAL	\$ 54,793.26