



**Report of the Canadian Parliamentary Delegation
to the 61st Westminster Seminar on Practice and Procedure
Canadian Branch of the
Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)
London, United Kingdom
March 9-12, 2012**

Report

Participants:

The Seminar welcomed 65 representatives from Alderney, Australia, Barbados, Bermuda, Canada, Falkland Islands, Ghana, Hong Kong, India, Jersey, Kenya, Kiribati, Malawi, Malaysia, Maldives, Malta, New Zealand, Oman, Pakistan, Rwanda, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, the Gambia, Trinidad and Tobago, Uganda, and an observer from UNDP. Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims, MP and Mr. John Williamson, M.P. represented Canada.

Aim:

To enhance the capacity of the delegates to work more effectively in their respective legislatures.

Objectives:

To explore through briefing, discussion sessions and practical observations:

- the role of Parliament in holding the Executive to account
- the role of opposition parties and cross party relations
- Party discipline and transparency
- the role of second chamber and bicameralism
- the relationship between Parliament and the media
- representation and the role of the MP in the constituency
- role of the Speaker\Presiding Officers and Members' services

Summary:

This seminar was very well planned with structured seminars, discussion sessions, working receptions/dinners, Parliament in action sessions, visits into ridings and tours of Westminster. The delegates found the experience to be both informative and educational. It was very exciting to have the opportunity to discuss the workings of Parliamentary democracy with colleagues from other countries, and realise how cultural context has shaped parliamentary practices based on the Westminster model. The sessions that included small group work to enable an exchange and discussion of different experiences were the most dynamic and memorable.

Both the Question Period and the Prime Minister's Question Period were interesting experiences. It was great theatre and democracy in action.

One of the highlights of the seminar was the visit into a suburban riding. The organisers did an excellent job of matching ridings. The delegates had the privilege of visiting a diverse suburban riding.

Session 1: Introduction to Parliament

A review of the structure of the UK Parliament with a focus on historical background, recent reforms, defining features, current issues and recent debates. A notable change is that the backbenchers actually determine what is being debated in the House. The Speaker is elected by the House, and most of the Chairs of Standing Committees are also elected. The House now has petitions on its website and if over 100,000 signatures are collected then there is the potential for a debate in the House. UK has moved to a fixed term Parliament and the Prime Minister needs a two-thirds majority to invoke early dissolution. England has its first peace time Coalition government so opposition is limited. The House of Lords composition is undergoing transformation and its future is being hotly debated. It was interesting to note how each country had adapted the Westminster model.

Session 2: The Legislative Process

The focus of this session included where bills originate, Private Members' bills, drafting of bills, and how do they become law.

Session 3: Role of the MP

MPs have to be prepared for unpopular causes/issues. At the end of the day the MP has to do what is "right". The role of the MP is to be both re-active and pro-active: both in Parliament and in the riding. The use a variety of tools, including new technologies to engage constituents and interest groups was explained. Constituency work was referred to as "surgeries" and not all MPs have riding offices. A concerted effort is being made by the MPs and the House of Commons to reach out to disengaged citizens.

Session 4: The Role of the Opposition

The focus of this session was on the role of the opposition in scrutinising the Executive, the financing of opposition parties, and how to work in cooperation with members from other parties. The opposition has to focus on building strong links with civil society groups. It seems opposition parties in all countries struggle with attracting media to cover issues. Everyone yearned for media to be truly free/independent of the state and governing party. Critical for the opposition to focus on issues and build alliances (be creative).UK is moving to elections for Police Commissioners. Opposition day motions get very little attention and it is a struggle to get the message out in the public domain.

Session 5: Running Parliament

The Clerks gave an insight into how the two Houses work together and how the UK Parliament is administered and managed. A very technical and informative session.

Session 6: Bicameralism: the work of a Second Chamber

The session included a panel presentation on the advantages and disadvantages of a bicameral system, the relationship between the two Houses, and the role of the Lord Speaker. The House of Lords has been undergoing significant changes and the draft House of Lords Reform Bill would lead to major transformation. This Bill is very

contentious and huge power struggle between the two Houses. There is a big concern about having two Houses with elected representatives as this could cause huge struggles and gridlocks. There is a fear an elected House of Lords could weaken the House of Commons and as both Houses would be democratically elected this could lead to a constitutional challenges. Currently the House of Lords has over 800 members (life peers, bishops, and appointed). The second chamber currently functions by consensus.

The House of Commons does the work and the House of Lords does the advising in “glorious surroundings”.

Section 7: Party Discipline within Parliament

The focus of this session was on how the Whips function between the Front and Back Benches, party discipline, and the interplay between Government and Opposition to deliver parliamentary business. Party discipline is administered through levels of Whip (one to three). Public confidence in the democratic process is undermined if the opposition is not allowed to carry out its role to scrutinise legislation.

Session 8: The Working Parliament

The delegates participated in being present for the Question Period in the House of Commons. Great theatre with the focus being on the Prime Minister, and the Speaker did not hesitate to use the power of the Chair to facilitate the session.

Session 9: The Committee System

The focus of this session was on the role and function of committees., Committees in the UK are independent and choose their own topics of study. Select Committee Chairs are elected by the House of Commons by a secret ballot and committee members are elected by each party. The time and resources are managed by clerks.

Session 10: The Role of the leader of the House of Commons

Focus of this session was on the management of the House and Parliament/Government relations.

Session 11: UK Devolution

The focus was primarily on the continuing challenges, and the upcoming vote in Scotland. The National Party has a majority in Scotland and has a referendum set for August 2014.

Session 12: Holding the Prime Minister to Account

England has a Prime Minister’s Question time. We The delegates watched and discussed the advantages and limitations of this piece of theatre.

Session 13: The Role of the Media in Parliamentary oversight

Focus on relationship between MPs and media, local and national media, usage of new technologies and training for MPs. Media plays a critical role and MPs need to receive training on how to build relationships and to utilise media at local, national, and Westminster levels. MPs encouraged to use new technologies. The relationship between media and MPs was described as one of use and abuse.

Session 14: Parliamentary Questions and motions

This was a very technical presentation of different types of motions and rules governing parliamentary questions in the House of Commons. The Speaker in the UK is far more likely to intervene to say a question has already been asked and/or answered.

Session 15: Broadcasting Parliament

There is a concerted effort in the UK to encourage and engage the public with the work of Parliament, and using the broadcast of sessions to inform and educate.

Session 16: Women in Parliament and Politics

Women are under-represented in both the Houses. The Labour Party has increased numbers through affirmative action but overall lots still has to be done. It was interesting that non-western countries have set targets and some are doing far better than western countries.

Session 17: Parliament and NGOs

Universal Periodic Review conducted on all members of UN. This session was focussed on the role of the NGOs in improving human rights in every country.

Session 18: Standards and Privileges

This was a discussion of very technical nature.

Session 19: The Role of the Speaker

The role of the Speaker in and out of the House, election, and party affiliation were discussed in this session. The Speaker at Westminster plays a very active part and ensures that Ministers make announcements in the House, and will use “urgent questions” to hold a minister accountable. The Speaker travels around the country to inform and educate the public about the important work/role of Parliament in a democracy. He sees himself as the ambassador.

Session 20: Parliamentary Information Systems

This was a look at the library and other supports available for MPs. Westminster has invested incredible resources to improve provision of support for MPs and improve online access for the public. Citizens can submit questions using Twitter and there is an outreach section with a focus on engaging and educating the public on the work of Parliament.

Session 21: Preparation for and Report Back on Constituency Visits

The delegates had the pleasure of spending time in numerous constituency offices. It was an interesting experience, and included visits to key constituency landmarks.

Session 22: Young People and Parliament-- Engaging the Next Generation

Dynamic speakers from the recent youth parliament shared their experiences and gave advice to parliamentarians. Westminster is making a concerted effort to engage youth both at home and overseas.

Respectfully submitted,

Mr. Joe Preston, M.P.

Chair

Canadian Branch
of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)

Travel Costs

ASSOCIATION	Canadian Branch of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA)
ACTIVITY	61 st Westminster Seminar on Practice and Procedure
DESTINATION	London, United Kingdom
DATES	March 9-12, 2012
DELEGATION	
SENATE	
HOUSE OF COMMONS	Ms. Jinny Jogindera Sims, MP; Mr. John Williamson, M.P.
STAFF	
TRANSPORTATION	\$2,764.53
ACCOMMODATION	\$3,817.27
HOSPITALITY	\$0.00
PER DIEMS	\$1,444.33
OFFICIAL GIFTS	\$0.00
MISCELLANEOUS / REGISTRATION FEES	\$761.77
TOTAL	\$8,787.90