

**63<sup>RD</sup> WESTMINSTER SEMINAR - 16-20 JUNE 2014 IN LONDON**  
**REPORT BY COUNCILLORS LESLIE BALDWIN AND GAVIN ELLICK**

**Monday 16 June**

The 63<sup>rd</sup> Westminster Seminar on Parliamentary Practice and Procedure begins with the customary welcome held in the Attlee Suite of Portcullis House.

**Session 1: Introduction to the UK Parliament**

This session was chaired by Diane Abbot MP, originally from Jamaica who was first elected to Parliament 27 years ago as 1 of 21 elected women (now there are 149 women – 23%). Although there had been Royal places of court, which basically formed Government prior to 1265, it wasn't until Simon de Montfort formally invited two nobles from each of 40 counties that the Commons were formed. This developed until the execution of Charles 1 in 1649 at a time of civil war ending with the "glorious revolution" 1688 and the formation of Constitutional Monarchy in 1689. This was the introduction of "democracy" and now there are 650 members of the Commons and 775 serving members of the Lords. The Houses of Parliament were built in the 1850s and now have many severe maintenance issues, many quotes have been received but the budget cannot be found or prioritised, I wonder why that sounds familiar? I guess the most obvious question would be "what would happen should the Queen / King decide not to follow the advice of its governing party (via Prime Minister)? It was stated that should such a scenario occur it would cause total outcry. It was believed the last time this happened was over 300 years ago when the Queen refused to approve a debate on the royal family. It has not happened since.

**Session 2: Parliamentary Administration & Governance**

Chaired by Sir Alan Haselhurst MP, there are around 100 Ministers (80 Commons and 20 Lords) in 3 levels of seniority. The Main Chamber hosts an hour long "question time" (today on Education) every day and on Wednesday Prime Minister's Question Time can result in long debates. In Westminster Hall a "parallel" main chamber is held where back benchers choose subjects to debate, they have no legislative power but can apply a lot of pressure holding Ministers to account. There are two main Committee types:

- Bills and legislation are normally dealt with by especially appointed ad-hoc committees and
- Select Committee's that contain NO ministers are responsible for scrutiny, they produce reports that Government have to respond to.

Examples were offered as PAC, Transport and Education. I had two questions answered by the panel :

**Q.** As the Lords are appointed to the house for life, how do they cope with the limited resource of budget and space?

**A.** With great difficulty! Many examples were offered of people doing what they can to secure an office, and new members especially would have to share space.

**Q.** How do they deal with any supplementary appropriation?

**A.** This roused a lot of amusement in the room as I was told how lucky as a Government we were to be able basically to adjust your budget at the year end. ALL Government overspends are referred to and investigated by the Public Accounts Committee and the inconvenience and discomfort caused by the inquiry are avoided at all costs.

### **Session 3: The Role of the Speaker**

Chaired by Nigel Evans MP with John Bercow, Speaker of the House of Commons and Baroness D'Souza Lord Speaker. With 90 different delegates representing 40 legislatures there were many different answers to the questions posed i.e. Should the Speaker have a role outside Parliament? How is the Speaker elected? Should the Speaker be a serving Parliamentarian? An outstanding presentation by John Bercow had us all in stitches and left a lasting impression.

### **Session 4: The Commonwealth Today**

Chaired by Henry Bellingham MP of a panel including Hugo Swire MP FCO Minister of State. The debate centred on 'what role should the Commonwealth play in enhancing business, trade, development and the protection of its citizen's human rights?' The general feeling from this was that the Commonwealth have an amazing amount of expertise and experience available from an extremely diverse pool, that it could be very beneficial if it could be organised in the most efficient way. It was all about teamwork and pooling of expertise. The dominant human rights issue was raised by Gibraltar regarding the perceived "bullying" by Spain. Many countries were still reporting human rights atrocities and once again I was happy that St Helena didn't suffer to that extreme.

**Session 5: The Legislative Process** Chaired by Elfyn Llwyd MP. A fantastic presentation by Kate Emms, Clerk of Private Members' Bills, explained the process from development and amendment through to law. It was explained that the House of Lords could no longer stop law in its tracks but can only delay by sending back an unapproved bill, with recommended changes. However the Commons, as the most powerful House, have no obligation to listen to any objections from the Lords but delay does cause immense irritation at times.

### **Session 6a: Parliamentary Information Services**

Chaired by Lord Chidgey, it was stated that to function better, parliamentarians should have access to modern and effective information services, but the investment is large. The Westminster library is positioned to reflect the fact that it is considered the most important room in the building; it handles 25-30 thousand enquiries per year. The last election saw 230 new members mostly unprepared for their role as a parliamentarian and the library was the first point of call. It was noted that the Education website had 1.5 million hits in the year reflecting a 40% increase on the previous year.

## **Tuesday 17 June**

The day was spent in the River Room, House of Lords

### **Session 7a: The Role of an MP**

Chaired by Jonathon Djanogly MP Discussions centred upon the role of the MP in his/her constituency, relationships within their party and whether constituency work was increasing.

### **Session 8a: The Role of the Opposition**

A look at life in opposition and cooperation with MPs of other parties and life in the shadow cabinet. What is the role of opposition MPs in scrutinising the opposition. Ministers have the area of expertise or specialism and are held accountable to all members; in order to enable effective opposition and equal knowledge of latest issues the opposition form a shadow cabinet with specialist areas allotted to shadow ministers (Government spokespersons).

### **Session 9a: The Role of the Leader of the House**

Chaired by David Hanson MP (Lab) How does the leader of the house organise Government business? What is the role of Leader in enhancing Parliament / Government relations?

### **Session 10a: Party Discipline in Parliament**

Chaired by Don Foster MP (Lib) A discussion on Party discipline and the role of whips in Parliament. How do whips manage those who vote against the party line? Lunch was hosted by Sir Alan Haselhurst in the Speakers House.

### **Session 11a: Media oversight of Parliament**

A major contribution was given by Nick Robinson, political editor of the BBC. The main point I picked up from this contribution was with the development of social media and live broadcasting of Parliament that journalists were now far more choosy when selecting which pieces of Government business they considered news worthy but the public exposure of any debatable Government policy was still seen as having a huge influence on scrutiny of Parliament.

### **Session 12a: Media Workshop**

Delegates were separated into small groups to generate a media story of a current problem or issue. My history of involvement in media seemed to make me the designated expert, truly I held the pen and asked the questions and wrote the answers down and presented our story to the crowd. The recently introduced Video Gaming machines being installed across St. Lucia have many unforeseen ills: The compulsive and addictive nature of these machines was highlighted when six year old Stacy died in hospital having suffered from starvation because her addicted parents were no longer able to afford food. Meanwhile the companies, that make

millions in profits every year, are allowed to operate without licences using a loophole in the legislation that qualifies them under the lotteries act instead of gaming license legislation.

The evening saw a chance for members of the delegation to take part in a **Chamber Debate** entitled **Internet Governance** held in the Grand Committee Room. I must say Gavin and I were limited in our knowledge of internet governance, but it did not stop us enjoying a well contested debate predominantly on censorship of the internet. The Motion before the house was “this house believes that the current Multi-stakeholder model of internet governance is the best way to promote freedom of expression, economic growth and development”. Over the 30 years or so of public access to the internet the development of the internet has changed the lives of millions of people around the world affecting the ways of communication, conducting business and bringing societies together. Is the current system fit for purpose? Should Internet governance be revised? In 2005 the United Nations held a world summit on the information society the first of such kind which affirmed the multi-stakeholder model of internet governance as the best way forward with the private sector, civil society, academic groups, technical communities and the voluntary sector all playing their part as well as governments with all stakeholders contributing on an equal footing. The Chair was the deputy speaker.

### **Wednesday 18 June**

#### **Session 13: Women in Parliament**

Chaired by Brooks Newmark MP (Con) the thought that women’s issues are best fought by women produced a general consensus that this was wrong with a few famous examples (Margaret Thatcher amongst them) offered. Many delegates reported that crèche facilities were made available for families of Government employees or elected officials, offered competitive maternity and paternity packages and more flexible working hours. Other delegates reported that there was a long way to go. All discrimination even positive discrimination was considered wrong by a number of delegates but the statistics on female engagement generally were still so poor that positive discrimination was still considered necessary.

#### **Session 14: Parliamentary Questions (PQ) and Motions**

Chaired by Sharon Hodgson MP (Lab) the session explored the three different types of question, written, oral and urgent. How do questions enable MPs to hold the Government to account? By asking Ministers to provide information, explain policy decisions or defend the actions of their departments. How effective is calling a minister to parliament to answer any urgent questions? Urgent questions are questions which are considered, by the Speaker, to be of an urgent character and relate to matters of public importance and require a minister to answer orally on the same day. It is difficult to meet this criteria as there have only been 85 urgent questions since 2009, over four years an average of just over 20 per year. MPs tabling a question for oral answer in the House must allow 3 days’ notice. Many more MPs wish to ask questions in the Chamber than there is time available. For each oral question time a random ballot or shuffle has to take place to select the MPs who will have their questions printed on the order paper. A question time session lasts for

one hour and will have the substantive questions tabled by the first 25 MPs drawn in the ballot printed along with the first 10 topical questions. Those questions printed which are not answered orally (for lack of time) receive a written answer on the day. Oral questions for public information, written questions for more detailed answer and urgent is very rare but normally baling after an episode.

### **Session 15: Holding the Prime Minister to Account – Prime Ministers Questions**

Led by Liam Smyth Clerk of the Journals, House of Commons, debate took place on the effectiveness of PMQs where whenever anything goes awry the PM has to answer questions on the following Wednesday. However many felt that often Ministers were selected as much on how they deal and look in the media and questions generally, rather than their political knowledge. PMQs were seen as having become the commercialised part of Parliament, with good and bad results.

### **Session 16: Bicameralism**

Chaired by Lord Norton of Louth (Con) Many parliaments have two Chambers and many are considering it. The work of the House of Lords in strengthening legislation was discussed and with an eye on extra oversight well supported. Members of the Lords were not paid a wage but claim expenses. The public perception of the Lords was also discussed and the resulting modernisation process of reform.

### **Session 17: The Working Parliament**

This actually entailed a visit to an active committee on the day. The delegation selected from a list of the day's active committees and was allowed to sit in on one of their meetings. I selected the Defence Committee where I found a friend of St Helena at work, Sir Bob Russell MP (Lib). I was quite surprised but pleased at the openness of the debate being televised and potentially viewed by the public. The question around the table when I arrived was "what are the likeliest current threats to Europe". Many being discussed were surprises to me but I had been away a long time! Research leads me to the conclusion that many may have been mentioned in order to strengthen the argument against defence spending cuts.

### **Session 18: Standards, Privileges and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority (IPSA)**

Chaired by Heather Wheeler MP (Con) Much of this session was dominated by the exposure of the expenses scandal, not something considered possible yet on St Helena but made you aware of some of the potential abuses of office.

The evening was capped off by a **Reception at No 3 Parliament Street hosted by Sir Robert Rogers** What a pleasure it was to while away the time on a glorious summers day with a glass of wine, which I consumed on a balcony overlooking Whitehall, to the envy of every passer-by and there were thousands, just on the tourist buses.

### **Thursday 19 June**

## **Session 19: The Future of Parliament: Reconnecting Parliament and the People**

This session was led by a presentation by Lord David Puttnam (Lab). Yes the award winning Film Producer gave an impassioned speech on how complacent we have come in numerous eras when believing that the Government were becoming more representative of the public. David was embarrassed to say that engagement was lower now than at the turn of the century and cited many reasons, including the ever growing list of pastimes and other interests. The feeling is nothing ever changes and they are more of the same. In independent Britain who really cares? The speaker felt that Parliament had “a duty of care” and that there was wisdom in listening to people on the street. Democracy is Government by explanation and many have been slow in using modern technologies such as social media, making use of media not just for negativity but a tool for getting the message across, e-mails, twitter, and social media sites i.e. Facebook where you can make contact/engaging letting the people know who you are and what you stand for or how you can be contacted should a constituent have need of assistance. Proving you are a normal person willing to interact with the “real people” when making a decision on any policy, feel free to get the people on board, explain but make sure you don’t lie. When one is referring to one self don’t be too critical try to engage the public in your fears, make fun of what the public would say but all the while retaining & giving respect, using these tools makes life better.

## **Session 20: The Committee System**

Chaired by John Spellar MP (Lab) another good friend of St Helena Lord David Shutt of Greetland made a large contribution explaining the workings of the Lords committees. The workings and powers of select committees were also discussed.

## **Session 21: Parliament & Civil Society**

Chaired by Stephen Doughty MP (Lab) Civil society across the world has never been so vocal; still their messages often fail to reach the decision makers. Discussed the benefits to both sides of mutual cooperation between parliamentarians and civil society organisations in particularly that it can lead to more informed and representative decision making.

## **Session 22: Electoral Systems**

Chaired by Sir Robert Smith MP (Lib) The strengths of the ministerial system is that it increases accountability and eases access to information however it can potentially lead to a lack of continuity as ministers can be blamed for one error, even if they have more strengths than weaknesses, and be moved or demoted. Committee systems tend historically to slow the political process but can often deliver better more informed legislation.

## **Session 23: Closing Plenary – Parliament, Power & the Executive**

Led by Sir Bob Russell MP (Lib) and Andrew Tuggey, Chief Executive Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA) UK. Strong speeches were made by Sir Bob and Andrew highlighting the successes and potential threats to the CPA.

As well as the potential power in the unity of the Commonwealth with emphasis on the fact that it was entirely up to the delegates and represented countries to decide how to use it. Communication is often the only power we need!

## **Session 24: Constituency Visits Briefing.**

Andrew Tuggey announced the allocated visits to the delegation. Gavin and I were separated and I was off to Edmonton. Followed by the **Presentation of Certificates.**

### **Friday 20 June – Constituency Visit to Edmonton**

Delegates were taken by luxury coach to Edmonton, a historically Labour part of the Borough of Enfield (North London). Having a budget of around £700 million per annum (puts our 13.6m into perspective a bit don't you think?) Edmonton is considered to be a deprived area but currently regeneration works are on-going. We were treated like VIPs being greeted by Andy Love MP (Lab) and many local Councillors who discussed the many issues they face such as youth violence, education to include around 33% who do not have English as a first language, long-term un-employment and the new bedroom tax that will impact many Edmonton residents, as well as changes to the disability benefits system. All of our hosts were hopeful that recent changes in the school structure were producing good results. We were taken on a visit to a local school and Enfield Citizens Advice Bureau where I made potentially helpful contacts for the future, Jill Harrison CEO.

Unfortunately we were late back to Westminster and I therefore missed my guided tour of Parliament, but in expressing my disappointment I had a personal tour (far more revealing!) courtesy of Rita Patel CPA UK, BIMR Secretariat. It was so nice by-passing the normally excessive security by having a pass already and being allowed in through non-public entrances. The grandiose nature of the Lords really stood out when you saw the Queen's throne. Gold from floor to ceiling and virtually the length of the wall, with doors symmetrically placed at each side. The chairs of the Lords were also far more comfortable green leather with speakers placed in the head extensions. Walking the adjoining corridor to the Commons you pass massive portraits of kings and queens through the centuries and a picture depicting the battle of Waterloo and the demise of Napoleon. The Commons is much smaller in reality than it appears on television and very different in style to the Lords. An interesting story that may help you in trivial pursuit one day, the one place that the queen is not allowed in Britain is the House of Commons as she is not a "commoner". This results in the Queen summoning (Ceremonially of course!) the elected MPs in the Commons by way of "Black Rod" at the state opening of Parliament.

The end had now arrived and I can't help to feel disappointed, just as you start to get to know everyone it is over such is life, but our disappointment is heightened by the fact that we cannot attend the planned workshops because they are over-subscribed. Our only other disappointment was moving from the lovely Doubletree Hilton Hotel to the rather dreary (by comparison) Imperial Hotel.

The contrast between the two CPA Seminars was quite outstanding the first in the relatively modern political arena of the Welsh Assembly and the very modern Senedd building and the second in the foreboding historic surrounds of London's Westminster. Both took an amazing amount of planning and preparation and I must

say went without a hitch, people who generally saw to it that you got everything you had the courage to ask for, outstanding and congratulations to all concerned.

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