

COMMONWEALTH PARLIAMENTARIAN & SMALL BRANCHES CONFERENCE IN CAMEROON

REPORT BY COUNCILLOR CHRISTINE SCIPIO-O'DEAN

Sunday 21 September - Arrived at Ascension Island.

During the period Monday 22 September to Friday 26 September I met with the Administrator, Ascension Island Council, visited Two Boats School and Babcock.

Saturday 27 September - Arrived at Brize Norton, United Kingdom.

Monday 29 September - Familiarisation meetings with Kedell Worboys and Andrew Tuggey, Chief Executive & Secretary Commonwealth Parliamentary Association (CPA).

Wednesday 1 October – travelled to London Heathrow with overnight at Premier Hotel.

Thursday 2 October - Departed London Heathrow Airport, travelled via France and arrived at Yaounde-Nsimalen airport at 8pm.

Friday 3 October - Identity badges and programme packs were issued to delegates.

I was interviewed by Professor Ken Coghill PhD from Monash Governance Research Unit, Australia and Dr Abel Kinyondo regarding Code of Conduct applying to Members of Parliament in the Commonwealth. The large amount of information that was gathered will be analysed over the next few months to prepare draft benchmarks to assist Parliaments wishing to prepare or revise Codes of Conduct. These draft benchmarks will be circulated for consultation followed by consideration at a workshop in 2015.

Saturday 4 October - The official opening ceremony of the 34th Small Branches conference was postponed due to the death of Dr William Shija, Secretary General of CPA since 1 January 2007. Following an emergency meeting of the Coordinating Committee a decision was made to adjourn the day's proceedings out of respect for Dr. Shija. It was decided that the small branches programme would be amended to have the opening ceremony on 5 October 2014 followed by three shortened sessions.

Sunday 5 October - The official opening ceremony of the 34th Small Branches conference took place at 10am with speeches from Small Branches Chairperson Honourable Abdulla Maseeh Mohamed MP, address by Joe Omorodion, Acting Secretary General of CPA, Rt. Hon. Sir Allan Haselhurst, Chairperson of the CPA Executive Committee, welcome by Rt. Hon Cavaye Yeguie Djibril, MP speaker of the National Assembly of Cameroon and President of the CPA Association. A vote of thanks was also given by Hon. Alix Boyd-Knights, Speaker of Parliament of Dominica.

A group photograph of the Small Branches followed the speeches.

The Small Branches conference convened with the 1st Plenary Session:

1st Plenary Session - *Establishing the role of a chairperson for Small Branches.*

The Executive Committee had recommended at their meeting held in London in April 2014, that a consultation of a small branches chairperson should take place at this conference. This matter was first raised with the Executive Committee at its meeting in Johannesburg in September 2013.

After a lengthy discussion, it was unanimously agreed that a recommendation should be made to the Executive Committee for the establishment of a Small Branches Chairperson. It was noted that Small Branches views will be represented at Executive Committee meetings, a change to the CPA constitution would be required and thought should be given to the structure of the annual conference to enable the Chairperson to attend the Small Branches Conference and the Executive Committee meeting.

It was agreed that a consultation with the wider Association will take place between October 2014 and February 2015 followed by the final decision by the Executive Committee to make the recommendation for adoption by the General Assembly in Pakistan in 2015.

2nd Plenary Session – *The Challenge of Small States vulnerabilities in their quest for social and economic development.*

Delegates unanimously endorsed my recommendation “Education is fundamental to improving small states resilience to improve social and economic outcomes that will be central to all policy decisions”.

Participants recognised that it was important to ensure that education is linked to the needs of the community and that adequate provision was made for vocational education and apprenticeships as purely academic education was not suitable for everyone. It was also vital not to undervalue those who worked in sectors where wages had traditionally been lower as many small states had found that it was often necessary to rely on immigrant labour to undertake these lower paid roles if local residents perceived that employment in these sectors was not valued.

3rd Plenary Session - *What is the role of Parliament in providing for the most vulnerable in society?*

There were four discussion leaders for this session. The first discussion leader, Rev Bob Key (Jersey) recommended ‘Parliaments and governments should work together with civil society and faith groups to transform the lives and opportunities of the most vulnerable people in society’. He began his presentation by discussing the various definitions of the word vulnerability and indicated that although some people may be vulnerable all of their lives, most of us are only vulnerable for some part of our lives.

The second Discussion Leader, Hon Juan Watterson, (Isle of Man) proposed ‘That all parliamentarians, Government or opposition, accept their responsibility for providing recommendations to support the vulnerable in society?’ He pointed out that in the Commonwealth there is a wide variety of vulnerability to be observed, but for individual MPs what they see and encounter the most is vulnerability at a personal level.

The Hon. Samantha Sacramento (Gibraltar), who was the third discussion leader, recommended that ‘it is the duty and responsibility of all parliaments to legislate to ensure

effective social protection in particular of the most vulnerable.’ She emphasised the need to ensure that any solutions to the problem identified must be tangible and highlighted the importance of identifying what is being done for the vulnerable in our society. She stressed the need to have effective social inclusion policies, as well as better dialogue between government and providers. She concluded by pointing out that with small jurisdictions it was possible to ensure that vulnerable people don't slip through the cracks.

Charles Chauvel, from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was the final discussion leader. He recommended that ‘As a key aspect of their duty of representation, parliaments should have regard to the particular importance of dismantling entrenched patterns of inequality.’ He raised the issue of the need for parliament as an institution to attend to the diverse voices of society. He outlined that parliament provides the framework for representation of society, including the vulnerable and indicated that there were 2 groups that traditionally had not had high levels of representation in parliament - women and indigenous people.

Members discussed the recommendations and noted that some of the measures to assist the vulnerable in society were being done by government and not parliament. It was suggested that often it depends on which party is in government and what they have in their manifesto about vulnerable people. The members noted that although in some cases it does depend on governments to have policies that assist the vulnerable; it was up to the legislature to pass any laws in relation to those government policies. Members discussed whether or not the recommendations applied to legislatures that did not have parties and agreed that one size did not fit all and that there may be need for different solutions for smaller legislatures with no party representation. However it was noted that it did not obviate legislatures in looking at the question of representation of women and other under-represented groups. All four recommendations were endorsed at the meeting.

Once the conference had completed, Small Branches delegates received a briefing by HE Brian Olley British High Commissioner for Cameroon where information was provided regarding useful tips, contact details, medical care availability, local law and customs, safety and security etc.

Monday 6 October - Official Opening Ceremony of 60th Commonwealth Conference. His Excellency Paul Biya, President of the Republic of Cameroon who is also the Vice Patron of the CPA attended this ceremony.

Addresses were made by Rt. Hon Cavaye Yeguir Djibril, MPA Speaker of the National Assembly of Cameroon and President of the CPA, Mr Joe Omorodion, Atg Secretary-General and Director of Finance, CPA Secretariat, Mr Amitav Banerji, Director Political Affairs Division, Commonwealth Secretariat, Mr Martin Chungong, Secretary-General, Inter-Parliamentary Union and His Excellency, Paul Biya.

British Islands and Mediterranean Regional Group Meeting – delegates were advised that the Small Branches conference were supportive of the idea of having a Small Branches Chairperson specifically to represent the interests of all of the Small Branches. It was noted that this would strengthened the role of small branches.

It was noted that a Member from the St Helena Branch will become one of the three British Islands and Mediterranean Regional the region representatives to sit on the for CPA Executive Committee for three years commencing October 2014. St Helena Branch nominated Cllr Derek Thomas.

Tuesday 7 October – I had opted for a tour to Limbe. This included a 45 minute drive to Yaounde airport, a 45 minute flight to Douala, followed by a 1.5 hour drive to Limbe. The journey to the sea side town of Limbe was more than what was expected. A canoe race was organised especially for the tour with winning cash prizes donate by CPA. The period between the take-off and arrival of the canoes was filled with dancing and traditional wrestling. All these activities took place in Modal Village. The tour continued to the Limbe Botanic Garden which was established in 1890 as an agricultural research station and forestry school. In 1989 governments of the Republic of Cameroon and UK entered into a bilateral agreement to renovate the Limbe Botanic Garden as a centre for the conservation of biodiversity in the Mount Cameroon region. Today Limbe Botanic Garden is a technical Operations Unit under the Ministry of Forest and Wildlife. The War memorial was of particular interest. Delegates on the tour from Southern Africa planted a symbolic tree. On this tour, we drove pass tea, rubber tree, palm oil and banana plantations.

Wednesday 8 October – attended the Commonwealth Women Parliamentarians (CWP) Business Meeting

It was noted that women continue to be disproportionately represented in governance and at all levels of decision-making.

Hon Lucia Witbooi, MP from Africa described the structure of the CWP Africa region and advised that a new CWP had been established in the Seychelles with Sierra Leone to follow. She advised that the African Region had issued statements condemning the abduction of young girls in Nigeria by Boko Haram.

Hon Sagufta Yasmin MP from Asia outlined the need to ensure not only legal rights for women but also cultural and economic rights and called for a more and effective democracy. She also requested for more intensive work to be undertaken to improve the representation of women in political life. She advised that although CPA is prominent, in her Region, the work of CWP is crucial to overcome the many barriers for women in Asia.

Hon Catherine Cusack, MLC from Australia gave an outline of plans for the regional strengthening funding which is allocated for the provision of a conference in July 2015 where all women MPs in Australia will be invited. She advised that domestic violence levels are high in Australia however the White Ribbon Day attracts many leading personalities to the campaign against violence towards women. She reported that the statistics of violence against women are not showing signs of improvement.

Ms Patricia Ferguson, MSP BIMR talked about the partnership work the CWP had undertaken with the Women's Convention which is an excellent lobby on women's issues. She explained the diversity of the BIMR region and of the remoteness of many of the Branches and of the challenges in supporting women in the smaller and remote jurisdictions.

The CWP draft Strategic Plan was also discussed and the draft will be circulated to all CPA branches for their comments before the deadline of 31 December 2014. The Strategic Plan should provide a framework for CWP to identify its achievements, strategically assess the challenges it encounters, build alliances and undertake actions across the CPA and beyond in order to ensure that both men and women Parliamentarians are supported in their work.

CWP believed that this conference will be the forum to push forward and ensure that governments respect the 30% female parliamentary representation in decision making.

Attended Workshop B - Joining hands for women's rights: The role of Parliamentarians in gender empowerment

Reaching out to gender empowerment organizations can help to understand how women are excluded in society. Members agreed that it is essential to understand the challenges specific to women to influence the development agenda on gender. Tracking legislation is important to ensure gender equity is achieved.

Attended Workshop E - How can Parliament ensure that young people are placed at the centre of sustainable development: The role of Education

It was felt that it is time to improve investment in Education to create an enabling environment for youth to prosper, exercise rights, gain hope and sense of community and engage as responsible social actors. It is imminently established that youth has a vital role to play in the sustainable development but how do we reach all young people? The biggest need is to ensure that education reflects the economic and social needs of youth and incorporates the concepts of environmental awareness and sustainable development throughout the curriculum. Easy access to government reports and documents can contribute to youth involvement.

Youth should be considered a solution and not as a problem. Their energy, creativity and critical spiriting identifying innovative solutions and building bridges and networks across groups have been demonstrated in many areas. It is vital that they are fully engaged in social change. If provided with an enabling environment, they can channel this energy into efforts that will benefit sustainable development, democratic consolidation and a culture of peace, for both present and future generations. The most important thing is to show young people how they can make a difference in practice.

Thursday 9 October – The General Assembly meeting was chaired by the Rt. Hon Cavaye Yeguir Djibril, MPA Speaker of the National Assembly of Cameroon and President of the CPA.

Dr. Shirin Sharmin Chaudury of Bangladesh Parliament was elected as the Chairperson of the Executive Committee – 138 votes were casted.

The following topics were discussed and considered:

- CPA Consolidated Audited Report and Financial Statements for the year ended 31 December 2013
- Increase in membership fees for 2015

- Working Capital Fund Financial Reports for the period ended July 2014
- Appointment of External Auditors
- Recommendations from the Executive Committee to the General Assembly
- Election of Treasurer of the Association
- Election of Vice Chairperson of the Executive Committee
- Strengthening the Role of Small Branches
- Executive Committee Meeting

Attended the meeting of the New Executive Committee

Hon Ronald Kaindee MP from Malaysia was elected as vice Chairperson.

Cllr Derek Thomas will become a member of the Planning and Review Subcommittee

It was noted that the Executive Council mid-year meeting will be held in Sabah, Malaysia from 27 April to 3 May 2015.

Friday 10 October - Farewell to delegates. As flights depart Yaoude airport to France on alternative days only, I had to wait until Saturday to depart.

Saturday 11 October - Depart Yaounde Nsimalen Airport at 23:15

Whilst in transit in London meetings were held with Andrew Smith from Lucy Faithfull Foundation, Don Taylor DFID Education Adviser, Nigel Kirby, Lord David Shutt, Lord Nigel Jones, Baroness Lindsay Northover, Michelle Callus, the Child Safeguarding and Domestic Violence policy officer, Su Crown, Deputy Head, Falklands and South Atlantic Department. I also visited Queensmill and Salusbury schools.

Sunday 26 October – departed UK

Whilst in transit on Ascension Island, I attended Ascension Island formal council meeting, toured the Airhead facilities with Larry Poultney, the US Base facilities with Major Emslie, Green Mountain National Park with Stedson Stroud. I also attended the Ascension Island Safeguarding Board meeting and met with Dr Judith Brown.

November 2014