

## **65th SEMINAR ON PARLIAMENTARY PRACTICE AND PROCEDURES**

The 65th Seminar was held in Portcullis House in the Houses of Parliament Westminster, for one week from Monday 21st to Friday 25th November 2016 inclusive. There were approximately seventy delegates comprising Parliamentarians and Clerks from different jurisdictions across the Commonwealth and the programme was very full. Over the five days the programme covered topics such as : Parliamentary administration, finance, Questions and Motions; Ethics and Standards; Private Members Bills, Protection and security of MP's, Modernisation of Parliament –including the fabric of the building; balancing tradition with modern practicalities, the legislative process, scrutiny and committee stages of a Bill, Parliament and Partnership (eg NGO's, civil society);the different roles of MP's – opposition, backbenchers, ministers; the differing roles of the Houses of Commons and Lords, the role of the Whips, the role of the Speaker.

We discussed the ever evolving Parliament and recent changes, including Back Bench Business Committee, Select Committees (how powerful and high profile they are), devolution for Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland; improved sitting hours(more “family friendly”); EVEL or English Votes for English Law; use of technology(use and abuse). Not all topics were relevant to St Helena such as those pertaining to party politics and the whips but were nonetheless of interest especially when contributions to discussions from other jurisdictions allowed comparisons to be made.

The hot topic was, of course, Brexit following the recent EU referendum and we were not disappointed as most speakers were happy to share their private views on how Britain could take this forward but the general feeling was that Article 50 needed to be triggered and it was expected to be a two year process and would probably require the authority of Parliament. We were fortunate that the last session on the first day we were ushered into the Robing Room in the heart of Westminster Palace for a panel discussion on “The Commonwealth and Brexit”. This was chaired by Rt Hon. David Hanson MP and held under the Chatham House Rule. (The Chatham House Rule originated at the Royal Institute of International Affairs Chatham House with the aim of providing anonymity to speakers and to encourage openness and the sharing of information. It is now used throughout the world as an aid to free discussion.) The three panellists were Baroness Smith of Newham, chair of the committee on exiting EU, Rt Hon Hilary Benn MP and Hon. Ryan Callus MP from Malta. It was a lively discussion and it explored the implications of Brexit for Britain's relationship with the Commonwealth. It posed the questions – “How sovereign is the British Parliament?” And “Could Brexit provide the Commonwealth with opportunities and the potential to increase trade with Britain because of shared history, strong cultural links, common language , business practices, and legal systems?” The biggest challenge was seen to be changing the laws next year, the untangling of Britain from Europe.

Malta took a lead in the panel discussion as they remain both part of the EU and the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association as does Cyprus and Ireland (a delegate from Ireland attended the Westminster Seminar this year for the first time).

We were able to observe Parliament in action during two debates, one brought as Back Bench Business: Motion: “Reform of Support arrangements for people affected by contaminated blood and blood products”. This Bill wanted compensation for people like haemophiliacs who had been infected with HIV and Hepatitis by contaminated blood and blood products. The other Bill was brought as a Private Members Bill – “Awards for Valour(Protection) Bill; 2nd reading.” This Bill wanted to prevent people wearing medals they had not earned. These were only tasters but allowed us to experience first-hand the quality of the debate and the process and procedures.

This also proved to be useful preparation for the Chamber Debate where eighteen of the delegates volunteered to speak on the following motion for three minutes each:” Legislations should adopt quotas to give greater priority to increasing the numbers of women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds among elected members of Parliament.” This debate took place in the Palace of Westminster in Committee Room 10 which is such an awe inspiring place and I was honoured to be one of those delegates that spoke, indeed mine was the final submission before the vote (see Appendix i) . The motion was defeated by 23 to 13 votes. As part of a workshop we prepared a Bill for Parliament and our group looked at legalising sativa cannabis for medicinal use (this was one particular plant from the group that had had a lot of validated medical research and was identified as a particular problem in the Caribbean islands who were part of our group and fortunately Malta who was also part of our group the delegate was a medical doctor who had done extensive research on this subject.

This week was a very useful and worthwhile seminar as it reinforced Parliamentary Practices and procedures, it provided access to senior serving politicians from both houses and senior officials, it allowed us to see behind the scenes in Westminster and it re-established the strong link within the Commonwealth proving that there is more that unites us than divides us and it further highlighted why Westminster is known as the Mother Parliament.

Pamela Ward Pearce  
3rd December 2016

Appendix (i)

### **CHAMBER DEBATE**

“Legislatures should adopt quotas to give greater priority to increasing the numbers of women and people from ethnic minority backgrounds among elected members of Parliament”

Madam Deputy Speaker, my instinct is to support the issue of adopting quotas to help increase the numbers of women and ethnic minorities in politics- I saw how effective it was for the Labour Party in Britain in the 1990's.

However, and this is purely a personal view, I do not believe it is necessary for St Helena for the following reasons

We do not have Party Politics

We have no ethnic minorities – St Helenians are all of mixed race

We are a small jurisdiction of 4,500 people, with twelve elected members of whom five serve on the Executive as the Cabinet. Of these twelve elected members, four are women and of the five elected members in the Cabinet two are women.

Proving that we already enjoy a greater percentage of serving women politicians than the 30% target identified in 1995 at the United Nations World Conference on Women.

This is not a recent phenomenon as I am a second generation female politician – I remember my mother serving in the 60's and 70's and she was one of 3 women as I recall back then; but then St Helena has always had strong women who served in public life on the island and became very good role models.

In conclusion Madam Deputy Speaker, to illustrate the strength of women in St Helena society we have this year sworn in our very first female Governor.

Pamela Ward Pearce  
November 2016