

## **74<sup>th</sup> Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments**

**Monday 9 March to Friday 13 March 2026**

I felt extremely fortunate as the Deputy Speaker to have been given the opportunity to attend the 74<sup>th</sup> Westminster Seminar on Effective Parliaments along with Cllr Denis Leo and Clerk Marita Bagley.

In one of my previous roles, I had built relationships with some staff at the CPA, so it was nice to meet them and reflect.

On day one following registration, we attended the Commonwealth Day Flag Raising Ceremony, and I had been asked to read an Extract from “The House of the Commonwealth” along with Senator Pitts from Belize.

The formal welcome was provided by Sarah Dickson OBE, CPA UK’s Chief Executive and Axell Kaubo, Programme Manager, CPA UK.

For the rest of the day the programme included: -

- Goal Setting – where our expectations for the Seminar were set;
- The Opening Address – The speaker for this session was the Rt Hon the Baroness Scotland of Asthal KC, and she spoke about the role of Parliaments in Unlocking Opportunities Together for a Prosperous Commonwealth which I found very interesting and informative, she has such a pleasant personality and was easy to understand; and
- In the afternoon we walked across to Westminster Abbey for the Commonwealth Day Service which was attended by the Royal Family and some dignitaries and this was really inspiring because even though I was seated far away from the royals just being inside of Westminster Abbey and listening was so momentous and a little emotional because the Abbey is so full of wonderful designs that are so awesome.

That afternoon we walked back to our accommodation joined by the Councillors from Ascension Island.

On day two we started off with a group photo on the steps in Westminster Hall followed by a guided tour of the UK Parliament which even though I had previously done, the history and beauty of the statues and art always captures my attention and never ceases to amaze me plus our tour guide was very entertaining and he kept our attention but it is such a quick tour so there was a lot more that I wanted to see.

For day two the Sessions were: -

- Session 1 – Parliamentary Systems across the Commonwealth - I felt this was interesting because when compared to some other legislatures I feel that St Helena is doing really well because some legislatures do not have all the relevant processes that we currently have in place;
- Session 2 - The Role of the Speaker - The Rt Hon Sir Lindsay Hoyle MP, Speaker of the House of Commons delivered the session which was a highlight for me

because he detailed his experiences and gave advice that I could relate to and take on board, like he said something along the lines of what's done is done you can only move forward it's no use looking back; and

- Session 3 – Privileges, Standards and Behaviour in Parliament - This was another informative session and one of the Speakers Gary Clueit had been on the recent Election Observation Mission to St Helena.

We attended a dinner in the evening in the CPA UK Room, and I was asked to speak a few minutes about my experiences with the CPA which I have been so appreciative of because I have gained much experience with the support of the CPA.

For day three the Sessions were: -

- Session 4 – Holding the Executive to Account - this was really insightful;
- Prime Ministers Question Time – this was a highlight for me as there are occasions when I watch this on TV but to be in the Chamber looking down at Prime Minister, Sir Keir Starmer and Leader of the Opposition, Kemi Badenoch and observing Speaker Hoyle was just electric and a moment to treasure;
- Session 5a – Using Parliamentary Resources Effectively for Scrutiny – I struggled with this session because one of the Speakers was really hard to understand so even the follow up answers to the questions was not clear for me to know the topic being discussed; and
- Session 6a – Leadership and Communication Skills for Parliamentarians - this was an interactive session that I really enjoyed as Ginny Radmall gave pointers on how to speak in public with confidence, the way to stand and make an impact.

We attended a Reception in the evening in the State Rooms, Speakers House which was nice and the UK Rep was also there to support the St Helena and Ascension delegations.

Day four consisted of the following: -

- Session 7 – Parliamentary Work through a Diversity, Inclusivity and Gender-Sensitive Lens - This session was interesting and one of the speakers explained his personal gender experiences. I made a comment after this Session on how the CPA UK had supported St Helena with funding to make the Council Chamber more accessible but because the Castle is a Listed building there were some planning objections so nothing changed;
- Session 8 – Safety of Parliamentarians and Parliaments - Following the recent deaths of MP's by their constituents this was a serious topic and although not currently an issue on St Helena it could be one day so should be given some consideration; and
- Session 9 – Artificial Intelligence Tools and Public Engagement in Parliaments - This was an unbelievable session because the video clips were so real and to later be informed that this was AI and we had been conned was really frightening.

We attended a Formal lunch at the Cholmondeley Room which was delicious and the views from the windows were just amazing.

Later that evening we caught the train up to Leeds (we arrived in the pouring rain, the ground flooded with pools of rainwater, the wind blowing the brolly inside out) where we stayed overnight so that we could have an early start with the constituency visit on Friday.

Day five consisted of the following: -

- We met with Alex Sobel MP for Leeds Central and Headingley and visited a primary school where the Head Teacher explained the positive changes implemented in a school where English was not the first language and all the difficulties the school encountered on a daily basis with students from different backgrounds and this was really heartwarming because the staff are genuinely fully committed to putting the needs of the children first.
- We then met with two Commonwealth Students from the University of Leeds (a young baby boy was fast asleep in the pram in the room) who explained their personal situations and their hopes and dreams once they completed studying and returned home plus how they found adjusting to the weather and the food.
- We were treated to lunch at the Tharavadu Restaurant, the lamb curry was really tasty.
- The final stop was at the Rainbow Junction which was a charity which really puts their heart and soul into providing for the community and those all alone and again it made me realise just how fortunate we are here on Island.
- We caught the train back to London and this time we could see where we were going in the afternoon sunshine.

I found the Seminar really informative and rewarding, it was very well presented and the topics covered were wide ranging so along with the debates within the different groups of delegations that changed on a daily basis, the opportunity for me to learn from others and network was really beneficial and I have many memorable experiences to reflect on that I hope will enhance my role as the Deputy Speaker.

Hon Connie Johnson

Deputy Speaker